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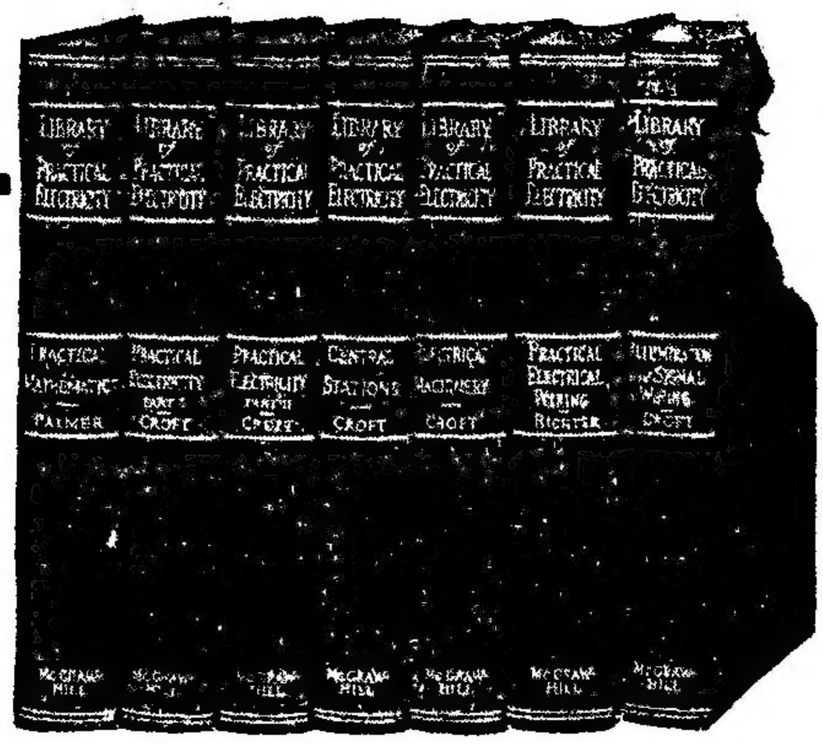

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ROBERT O. ERISMAN
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★ ★ GREAT BOOK LENGTH RANGE-WAR NOVEL ★ ★ — Page

IT'LL TAKE TWO GUNS AND A TOUGH KID!

by Clem Colt — 10

Yes, Tularosa's guns would barricade every pass and every bullet have Kane Marlatt's name on it, and if the kid was to backtrail now to Texas with what it took to smash a cattle king's drive to empire, he'd need first to trade lead with Tularosa's cow-stealing bushwhack horde, and match powdersmoke and gunflame with more powdersmoke and gunflame!

★ ★ SMASHING HOT-LEAD NOVELETTE ★ ★

MANHUNT TRAIL TO HELL....by D. B. Newton — 85

The Ladder outfit had no easy jobs—Kemp would have to ride hard, if he was sticking, and work hard, and keep his holsters oiled and tied-down-low!

★ ★ 2 THRILLING SHORT STORIES ★ ★

BLOOD AND TEXAS ON HIS BACKTRAIL.....
.....by H. A. DeRosso — 79

The bank robbery and murder on his backtrail wasn't the worst of it—the stranger was also a Texican!

WHEN THE JACKSON CLAN FIGHTS.....
.....by James Shaffer — 101

Old Whip Jackson made his own law, and saw that it was enforced, and folks knew he was dead serious when he spoke of smashing his own son-in-law if the kid didn't crawfish to him pronto!

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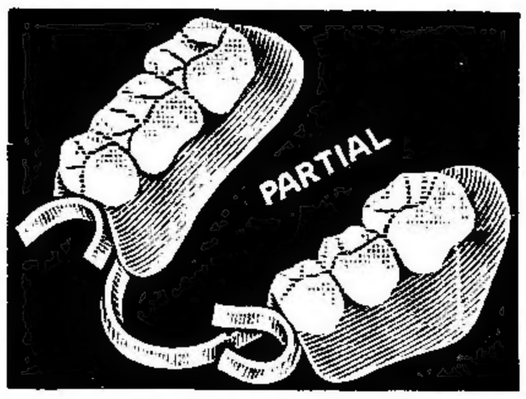

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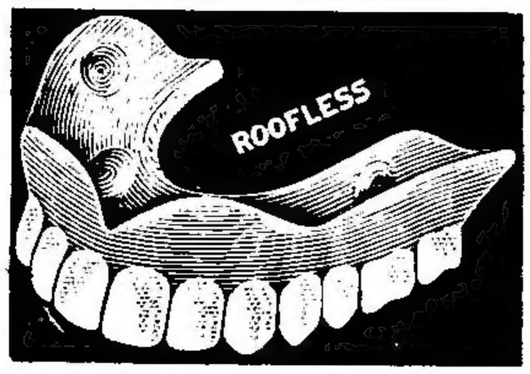

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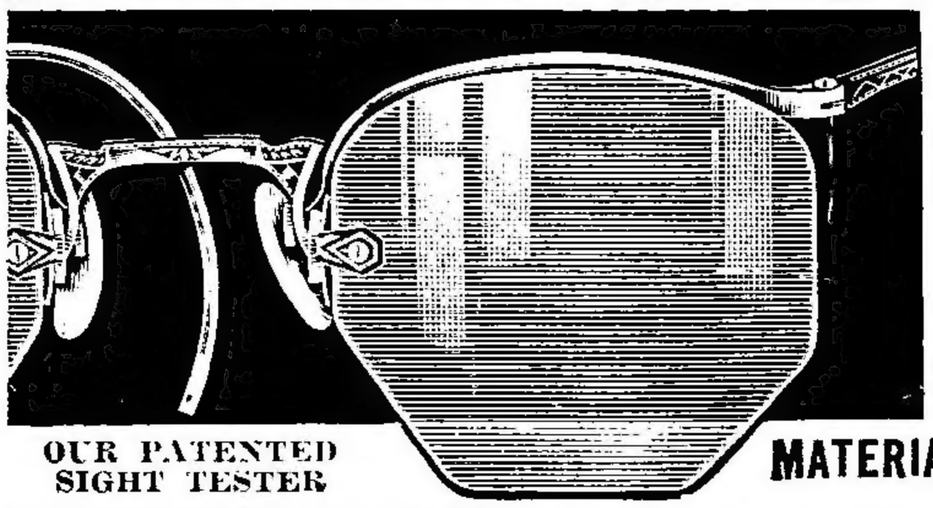

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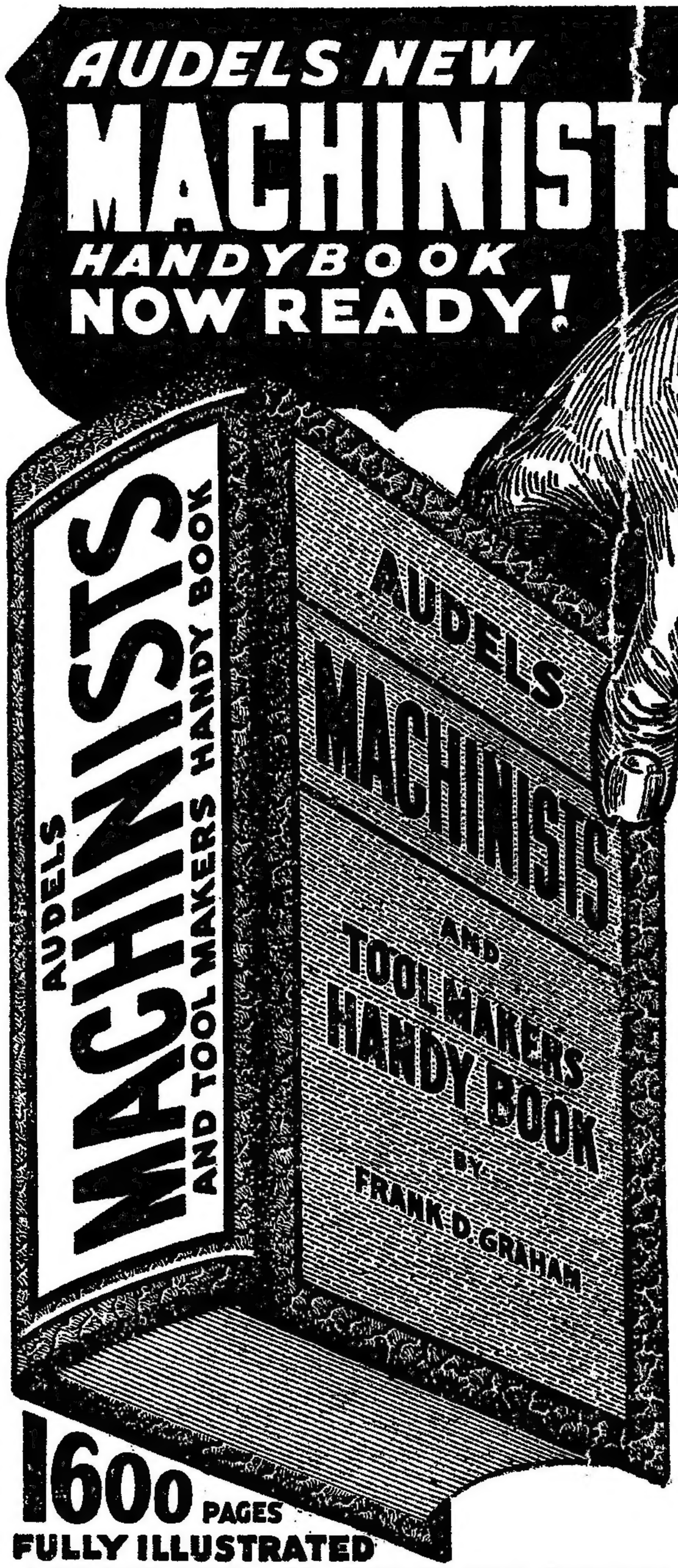

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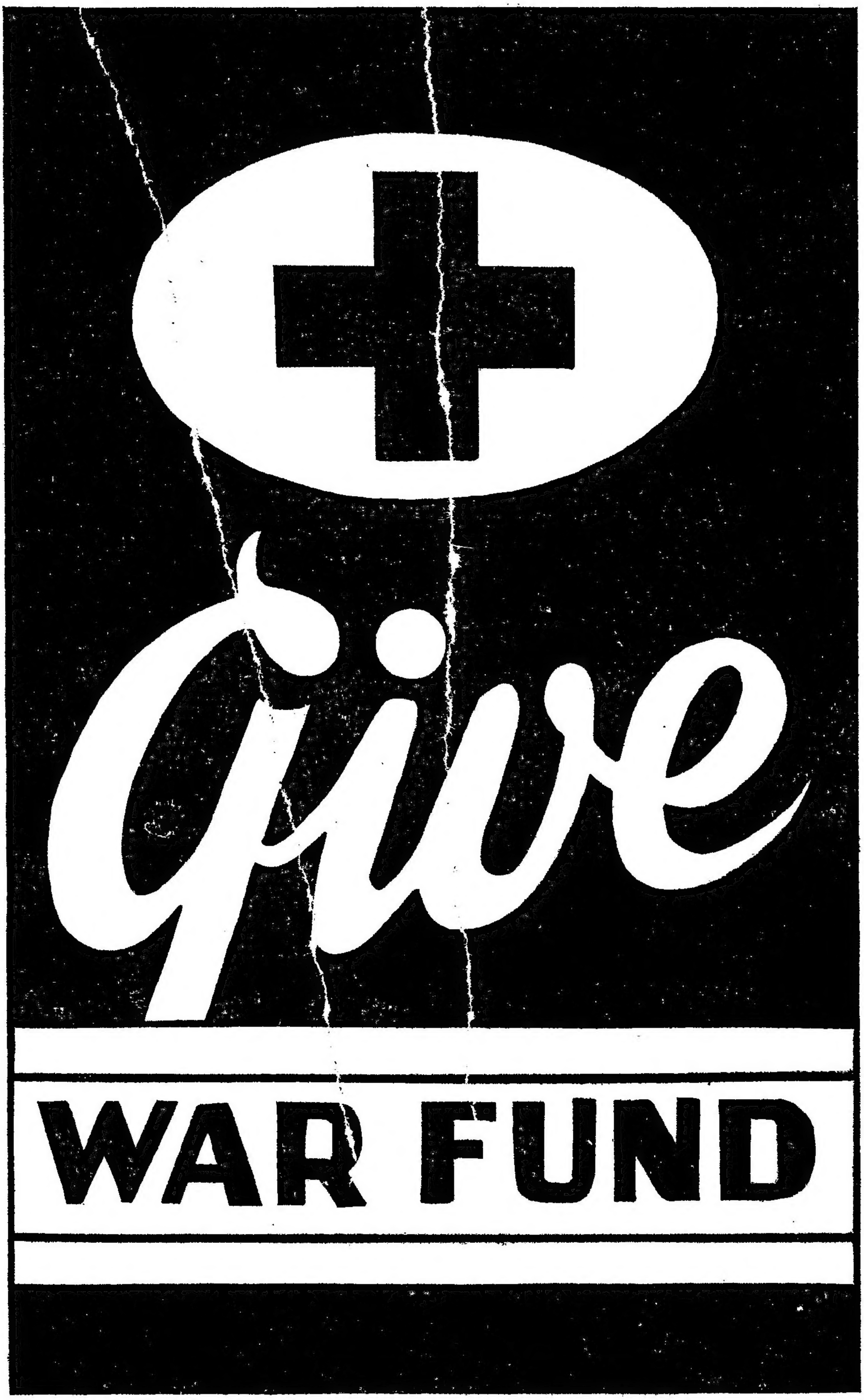
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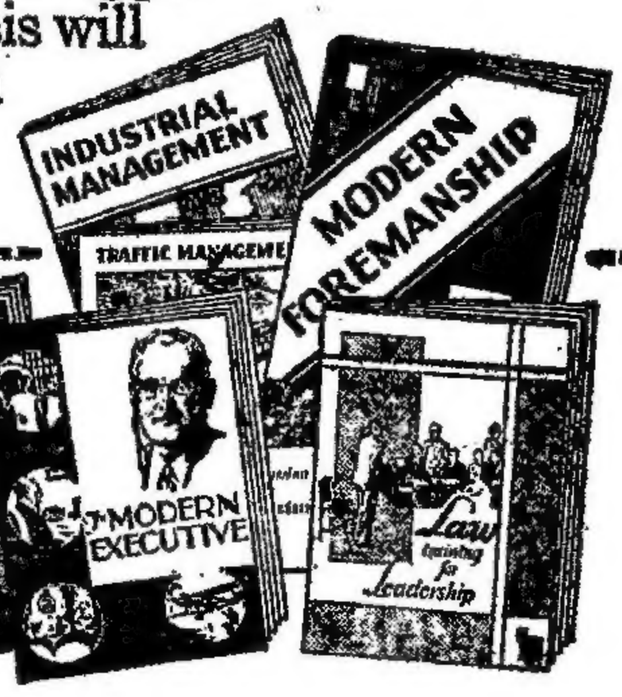

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IT'LL TAKE TWO GUNS

Marlatt's hands rose with the glint of six-guns.

CHAPTER I

TULAROSA'S GUNS

FRAGMENTS of shattered adobe dustily skittering off his hatbrim told Kane Marlatt with what gullibility he had swallowed the notion Tularosa's men had quit. Tularosa's men would *never* quit while life and breath remained in him who, of all Craft Towner's enemies, could alone bring ruin to the rancher's plans.

He was tall, this young Kane Marlatt, with a dark and high-boned face very easy of remembrance. Lash of the wind was plain seen on it, and sun's bright fury, and the turbulent ways that had shaped him. Peril's sharpness

AND A TOUGH KID! By CLEM COLT

Flame spurted from them, and the outlaw screamed and twisted!

Hole-in-the-wall for tinhorns and stage-boot robbers, Tucson might yet furnish Kane Marlatt the fort-up he sought to elude Tularosa's deadly guns. For every bullet now had the kid's name on it, and to get back to Texas to smash a cattle king's drive to empire, he must match powdersmoke and gunflame with more powdersmoke and gunflame!

was in each gesture, in his laugh, in his shout—in the flash of the teeth that showed through his tight, streaked smile. A penniless fool, he had oft been called—a soldier of fortune whom none dared hire for the wild high cour-

age that enlivened his acts and spoiled the pattern of the things men would have used him for.

Kane Marlatt, crouched, whipped a lean and desperate look about. The crumbling wall at his back was all that was left of some Mex woodpacker's shack—poor shelter against the rifles of Tularosa's riders. The fringe of timber between him and the mountain slopes he'd just come down would be filled with those riders, dismounted now and fanning out to trap him. They would probably do it.

He was afoot and this was a country strange and new to him who had come from Texas. He had lost his horse in a treacherous slide some ten miles back in the Santa Ritas, an hour and a half out of Greaterville. They had told him there to ride straight west and he'd come to the Santa Cruz Valley. There it lay right now, below and before him like a graybrown sea, stretching vast and lonely to the far blue crags that would be the peaks of the Tucson Mountains. Somewhere north, between here and there, would be the famed walled town of Tucson, home of the wild and the free—home to the tinhorns, and to the stage-boot robbers of the Spanish Trail.

Marlatt doubted he could make it.

Not that he was scared of that far a walk—he would gladly tramp twenty times that far if only the gods would let him. But the gods were having their horse laugh now. Two hundred and fifty odd miles he'd come—all the dusty way from Hachita in the heart of the Grant County cow country. All those broiling miles he had come with the truth about Craft Towner, that later he might return to send the cattle king's grand schemes toppling. To expose him for the man he was—the elusive, night-riding "Kingfisher."

Kane Marlatt had thought when he got to Greaterville he had given Towner's men the slip. That had been his one great foolishness. He had underestimated the dogged tenacity of Tularosa, Towner's range boss. And now was likely to pay with his life if Tularosa had any say in it.

DANGER smell was a tang in the wind that plastered Kane Marlatt's curls back. And his grin was tight as he dropped to the ground and, snail-like, wormed his way to the wall's far corner whence a glimpse of Towner's men might be had.

The corner reached, he dragged off his hat and had his quick look; and was mighty thankful it had been quick. If it hadn't, the lead that kicked grit in his face might have grabbed the range for a second neat shot that would have smashed him between the eyes.

He lay still awhile in scowling thought while the sun's heat pulled the sweat from his pores and time ran on with no further sound from the timber-hid men whose plain, grim purpose was to see that he left his bones in this place, and the secret he had wrenched from them.

It gravely looked, Marlatt coolly thought, as if this were to be the end of him. He didn't particularly mind being afoot, or even in a strange land, far as that went, for God's open had always been friend to him and he could easily have made out had these been the only threats to his safety. But Tularosa, he had learned, could not be ignored; nor could his gun-slinging, cow-stealing riders. Particularly now, when he'd just discovered his cartridge supply was exhausted. He had what few shells were still in his weapons, and not one cartridge more.

It was not in the man to wait much longer. It was high tribute to Marlatt's marksmanship that he had countenanced any wait at all. Tularosa's way was a headlong way—brash and

reckless as Marlatt's own. None knew this better than Marlatt, who had worked two months with the man. He was frowning with the somberness of that thought when Tularosa's yell came sailing downwind from the dappled shadows of the timber.

"Marlatt! *Marlatt!* You still there?"

The solemn turn of Marlatt's lips grew faintly mocking. He made no answer. Nor did he move.

He heard Towner's foreman curse—heard the swift speculations of Towner's men. Then Tularosa's lifted voice said: "Damn your soul! Come out of there! Come outa there with your paws up, pronto, or by Gawd we're comin' after you!"

Marlatt chuckled. "Any time you're ready, boys."

Tularosa's men went silent. The feel of this thing got tighter and tighter. Marlatt turned his head, inch by slow inch, and raked a look behind him. The squat thick brush of a burro weed made a sturdy green against the yellow earth. It was three feet back of him.

Marlatt looked at the dobe wall again. Its crumbling contour, tapering toward the corner, where he lay rose a bare two feet in height. He tried to recall what degree of angle the timberline might have; how much elevation at that distance would be needed to spot him above the wall's rough rim. Not much, he thought, were he by that weed.

He turned over with an infinite care and with his rifle flat against the ground he gripped it by the barrel, edging it outward till its stock stopped against the weed's gnarled trunk.

Nothing happened.

Marlatt's grin showed a cool bleak humor. That Tularosa's men had not seen his rifle stock was scant insurance they would not see him. They were bound to see the weed's bushy top. It was ten inches high; and he meant to have it even though certain they'd catch its blur when he pulled it loose. With the weed in his hat and his hat on his head, anyone who sought to pot him as he looked above the wall would very likely be considerably surprised.

HE PULLED back his rifle. He dragged off his hat and edged around until his booted feet were solidly against the wall. With a fervent hope that it would hold he exerted pressure, felt his shoulders scraping outward toward the weed. One outstretched hand abruptly touched it. He lay slack then, slowly tightening his hold on it.

He was all set to yank it loose when his narrowed glance intently scrutinized a thing he had not thus far noticed. Instead of dropping sheer and direct to the far-down floor of the Santa Cruz Valley, the tip of a juniper gently waving beyond the lip of the land just yonder seemed to indicate chance the slope fell away in more easy stages.

Kane Marlatt lay awhile, hard thinking. The plateau's brink was forty feet distant, beyond the burro weed in his hand. But if he could reach it and the slope *did* descend in easy stages—or if it but had a ledge he could get his feet on, there was a sporting chance that even yet Tularosa's chase might be made to end futilely.

There would be risk, of course; grave risk in plenty. But risk and Marlatt were old bedfellows. He would be seen, and the Towner guns would play grim music. Yet it was something else that held Kane Marlatt moveless with the burro weed still clenched in his hand and his eyes grim-squinted in the sun's hot light. The plateau's brink lay forty feet distant. His rifle lay by the adobe wall. Should he risk precious moments to fetch the rifle or rush for the slope without more thought of it?

He'd about decided to leave the saddle gun when Tularosa's growl came down the wind. "All right, boys!"

Tularosa snarled; and hard on his words came the crashing of brush that told they were coming.

Marlatt's reaction was characteristic. He yanked out the weed and rolled for his rifle. He snatched up his hat, stuffed the weed in its crown, clapped the hat on his head and cinched up its chin strap. Beneath his knees the ground was trembling to the booted rush of the headlong charge as, utterly calm, Marlatt picked up his rifle.

He thrust its barrel across the wall and raised himself till his glance could follow it. From three different angles slugs tore through his hat; and the Towner men loosed savage yells as they bent to their triggers, wild to drop him.

Marlatt sighted and fired, as cool as a well chain. One bent-forward runner at the extreme left of the converging charge stopped running with one foot still raised. His rifle struck ground with an unheard clatter. His arms flailed wildly and he turned half around, spilling sideways as his knees let go.

Marlatt fired again. A lanky man, dead center of the charge, reared back as though an ax had struck him, then jackknifed forward with his face plowing sand.

Marlatt's face and hat front were brown with adobe dust and his eyes burned fiercely from the flung grit in them, but he held his place with inflexible calm.

Marlatt's rifle picked up Tularosa's gaunt figure; he centered its bead on the man's checked shirt. But just as he triggered Tularosa whirled, leaping sideways, and tore for the timber. The final bullet from Marlatt's rifle kicked dust on the backs of his bounding boots.

MARLATT swung the warm barrel for another target. He had no shots left but they couldn't know this. Nor were any waiting to discover the fact. Like their boss Towner's gun hands were scuttling for shelter.

Marlatt dropped the Winchester and raced straight west for the plateau's brink. Reached it, stood crouched there, and bitterly cursed. There was a ledge beyond—but it was fourteen feet down and hardly three feet wide; and after that the slope dropped sheer for eighty feet to the rock rubble piled on the valley floor.

But he had to go over—there was no choice now. If he stayed where he was he'd be dead in ten seconds. And there was no time left to get back to the wall. Already Towner's men had swung round and were firing. The sound of that lead was a shrill high fury as he dropped to the earth and swung his legs over.

Spattered grit from their shooting stung his cheeks, bit his forehead. With all his weight on his elbows he twisted his head for one down-flashing look and that way, still looking, he felt the lip crumble.

And then he was dropping—swift plunging through space.

CHAPTER II

RED SINKS THE SUN

ONE final harsh regret frowned Marlatt's face as he felt the lip break under him. He should have killed Tularosa while he'd had the chance. All thought was then dashed out of him—shocked from him in that fierce and headlong impact with the ledge. He struck on his feet but could not keep them. Fall's force and sudden stoppage doubled him, bulged him outward and he staggered, reeling wildly. He got one backthrust foot beneath him and knew in that same moment there was naught beyond but vast, immeasurable space and, finally, the

rocks of the valley floor. Instinct flung both arms out in a desperate windmill sweep and he felt something brush an elbow. His clutching fingers told him it was an outthrust branch of the juniper and he closed the hand round it savagely. With both feet hard against the rocksharp rim of the ledge, he swayed far out to the springy give of the bending branch. With a long-drawn groan it abruptly snapped—just as Marlatt's right fist grabbed frantic hold of a crevice-bound root.

He was still hanging on but that was all. And the root's brittle creak was a fearsome thing as Marlatt's boots skittered off the ledge and dropped all his weight clean and hard against it. Sweat was cold on the back of his neck and the palms of his hands were slippery with it. He tried to dig the toes of his boots in, but the shale of the cliffside wouldn't hold him. And all the time the protesting creak of the weight-strained root told how short was the time it was like to support him.

He dropped the branch his left hand held and grabbed for the trunk—caught a hold low down on it. He let go the root and, wildly swaying, with tremendous effort got his right hand, too, round the juniper's trunk and hoisted his knees, got his boots on the ledge again.

With the pound of boots stamping earth above him and the Towner men's shouts grown loud, triumphant, Marlatt knew a desperate need for haste ere those running men reached the brink and looked over.

Hand over hand he pulled himself upward with the juniper groaning and crazily swaying till at last both his knees were firm on the ledge. He let go his hold of the tree and with arched back dived for close contact with the roughly eroded plateau's wall. With back hard against it and taut nerves vibrant he heard Towner's men on the brink above him.

He reached for his pistol and found it gone—shaken loose, no doubt, by his recent exertions.

He was trapped again!

His soft curse was harsh. But more bleak still was the glint of his eyes as he flung his glance upward. Gone tense, all the lines of his face broke queerly. He blinked, shook his head, and blinked again. Then a tight grin tugged the set of his lips and he dragged one vast, relieved breath to his lungs. The cliff curled inward under the brink; wind and weather had cut away some soft spot here so that where he lay he could not see the cliff top—nor could the men grouped on it, peering down, see him.

"Well," Tularosa's voice said wickedly, "that's that! By Gawd, we got him!"

The cold satisfaction in the Towner man's words rolled a thin, silent laughter across Marlatt's lips as he sank weakly back against the cliff's rough wall.

A LONG while later Kane Marlatt got up and took stock of himself.

He stared across the valley to where, shaded with mauves and cereleans, the Tucson peaks loomed against the sun. Afternoon was sliding into evening and, else he hurried, night would trap him on this ledge.

Marlatt threw a quick glance upward. Where he stood the wall curved away from the ledge, sloping gently east toward the plateau's lip which, here, was twelve long feet above him. Three feet wide the ledge had been back there where he'd dropped onto it; where he stood now it was only two.

With a grimace Marlatt continued, and the ledge continued to narrow. It shrank away to a foot and a half—to one; and at this width, around some old erosion, drove acutely upward at an angle of approximately thirty degrees. One bare slippery foot of treacherous

shelf, and beyond it one wild drop through space to the rock-littered floor of the valley beneath.

Marlatt jammed his belly against the wall. He spread his arms for greater balance and a nearer contact with the red cliff wall, and he moved one foot at a time, carefully testing each new surface before giving the trust of his weight to it.

The plateau's lip was just above him now, hardly two feet—within easy reach should he raise his arms. He did not make that mistake however. He was quite aware of what would happen should he trust his weight to that crumbly lip.

When the exploring fingers of his stretched right hand hooked into a crevice, he stopped; when he discovered that roughness would give him purchase he solemnly lifted his left foot, bringing it up from the knee till he had its heel in his cupped left palm. Slowly then, and with an infinite care, he worked the boot off, after which he stood utterly still till the reddening sun dried the cold sweat off him. Tossing the boot to the land up yonder, he commenced operations with the boot still on him. The sun was low when the second tossed boot sent its faint thump down and Marlatt, with only thin socks between himself and the ledge, resumed the tortuous climb again.

He was a man whose muscles were stretched violin strings when he stood at last upon solid ground. Like a man gone blind he made his way to the adobe wall and dropped with his back muscles sagged against it.

Marlatt got up presently and began his search. He was a man of methods and method rewarded him. Near timber's edge he picked a pistol out of the brush—a Colt's .44 with five shots in it. He felt a great deal better with that gun in his holster.

The sawtoothed crags of yon western mountains were edged with a fiery glow from the vanished sun when he struck off north, well back from the brink. He had no food, no horse, no rifle; but with tightened belt and his boots pulled on he struck out for Tucson and the man Craft Towner had hired him to kill.

CHAPTER III

Old Pueblo

THE Tucson stage office, dingy, dim, thickly coated with dust, was about the last place a man would expect to encounter a pretty girl. Yet one was in there—a *damn* pretty girl, if you accepted the views of the tall man lounged in its doorway.

"But I told you," the girl said firmly, "Ora doesn't want a receipt. He's not asking you to take this money on deposit—"

"With all due regard, ma'am, if it's a check your uncle wants I'm afraid you're going to have to go to the bank for it."

She said with quick challenge: "Is the Company tired of Ora Flack's business?"

"My dear young lady!" The agent looked shocked. "The Company regards your uncle with highest esteem—"

"Then—"

"Unfortunately," the agent said regretfully, "*I* am not the Company. I have to follow instructions and my instructions in this case are very plain—*very* plain. A receipt I can give you gladly. But no checks."

She stood and considered the look of his face. "Very well," she agreed, and pulled on her gloves. "I shall tell Uncle Ora you re—"

"Gosh sakes!" cried the agent hastily. "Don't you do it, ma'am! Don't you go puttin' it *that* way—*I* ain't got

anything to do with it!" His countenance showed a most ludicrous alarm. "I got my orders straight from headquarters, ma'am—*no more checks!* If it was a little one you was wantin' why I'd take a chance an' make out like I'd forgot it or somethin'. But forty thousan' is a hellemonious passel of money, ma'am—"

He broke off, suddenly remembering the man in the door. The girl, too, swiftly turned to see if the stranger had overheard. But the fellow was gone.

The agent breathed a little easier. He mopped his face with a red bandanna. "You tell your uncle I'd like powerfully to oblige him, ma'am. But I'm plumb hogtied with these dingblasted regulations. I tell you, Miz' Ranleigh, ma'am, you can't hardly blame the Company, come right down to it. They been driven—"

Miss Ranleigh saw the talk freeze on his mouth; saw the mouth drop open, ludicrous in its dismay. Saw a wagon-sheet pallor cross the wrinkles of his cheeks.

The cold rasp of a voice just back of her said: "Reach—an' reach quick, brother!"

Statue still Miss Ranleigh stood, as though the words had rooted her there.

Two men stood there with lifted guns. Jerked up neckerchiefs hid their features, all but the hard, unwinking eyes that were rummaging the agent for signs of resistance. Then the taller man, a rawboned ruffian with a battered horse-thief hat on his head said coolly with a lurking humor. "Just hand me back that grip on the counter . . . Thank you kindly, ma'am."

HIS bold eyes glinted a grudging approval. "You show good sense. No fuss nor feathers—that's the way I like 'em. If they's anythin' I hate it's a screamin' female." The hard eyes left her; bored the frozen agent. "Let's see what you got in that safe there, pardner."

The harried agent, very conscious of Miss Ranleigh's stare, flung a badgered glance from one to the other of them. The tall man's pistol joggled suggestively. "I'd shore hate to puncture such a puny worm, but if you don't git that strongbox opened right pronto, mister, you're goin' to make a new voice with the angel chorus."

The agent gulped. Pride forgotten, he backed from the counter like a man treading eggs.

"Well, now. That's more like it," the tall man drawled. Just stoop over now an' spin that—"

The rest was lost in a jarring explosion that left Miss Ranleigh white and shaking. Having stooped, the agent had grabbed for his shotgun.

The tall man sheathed his smoking pistol. His pardner had already backed out the door. His voice called guardedly, "Okey, Buck," and the tall man nodded. The bold eyes swept Miss Ranleigh's face. "Better hightail it, ma'am—"

"You cowardly murderer!"

The tall man snorted. " 'D you think I was goin' to let thet little worm shoot me?" He laughed harshly then and, with Miss Ranleigh's grip tucked under his arm, backed into the street and was suddenly gone.

Kane Marlatt rode into Tucson on a flea-bitten bay about 9:27 of a cloudless morning. He saw the time on a clock in a saloon he was passing. There was dust in the weary creases of his high-boned face and his clothes were gray with it, but the touch of his glance was sharp as knife steel as he surveyed the signs whose faded letters were crudely painted on the walls of the buildings. He was searching for something, and when he found it he turned

his horse into the Calle Real and jostled his way down its cluttered length till he came to the shaggy posts of Oliphant's Corral.

There he stopped and got down.

A long-haired man lounged out of the shade. "I'm Oliphant," he said. "How's Joe doin'? Still got his rheumatiz?"

"Joe?— Oh!" Marlatt grunted, following Oliphant's look. "Expect I got this bronc from Joe's range boss. . . ."

"That would be Hartsell."

Marlatt shrugged. "I was to leave the horse here—"

"Gear too?"

Marlatt nodded.

"Guess you'll be wantin' a complete outfit then."

"What have you got?"

"Well, I expect we could git together —*if*," Oliphant added cautiously, "you got the necessary wherewithal. This is a chancey country, mister, as mebbe you've found out. Lotsa drifters—some of 'em right smart lookin,' too. But yere t'day an' gone t'morrah. Man can't invest in no credit—"

"I've got money—"

"I won't take no Tubac money—" Oliphant said.

"I'm talkin cash. Coin of the realm," Marlatt grunted.

"Good! I kin allus hear the voice of Cash. You go right ahead. Pick you out any bronc you fancy; then we'll go look over the saddles. Go right ahead," he prompted.

Marlatt's look at the renters held little charity. "Let's get this understood," he said. "I'm lookin' for a horse—not crowbait."

The corral keeper thought that over. "A special horse, mebby?"

"It's certain-sure got to *look* like a horse." Marlatt squinted across the far side of the pen. "What you got in that shed over there?"

"Ummm . . ." Oliphant's tone was as sly as his glance.

MARLATT got a roll of bills from his pocket and let the man see the ends of a few. Mr. Oliphant shed his coyness pronto; flashed the smile of a man of business. Marlatt, inside of five minutes, was the owner of a blaze-faced roan whose shape held promise of speed and endurance. "I'll be leavin' him here for a while," Marlatt said, and went off afoot to explore the town.

He found little to attract him. It began as it ended in desolation, a rolling range of mesquite and greasewood.

There was a bank off yonder—big letters said so; but Marlatt would have guessed it without the sign by the number of beggars gathered round it. To the left of the bank was a marshal's office, and next beyond was an immense saloon. A lanky man on its porch was extending welcome; a frockcoated fellow who stood in the shade of its wooden awning and traveled his voice up and down the street. He was laboring under a considerable strain for a crowd was gathering just beyond him, jamming up traffic and growing every second. A red shirted fellow with a twenty-mule team offered free education in the use of cuss words. A long-geared bullwhacker yelled: "Git the Marshal!"

Marlatt tugged the leg of a halted horseman. "What's up?"

"Hell Crick, by the look. Miz' Ranleigh's claimin' them two fellers stole her uncle's money?"

"Which two? Who's Miss Ranleigh?"

"Who's Miz'—Godfreys!" the horseman stared and spat, "You mus—"

"Chrissakes, shut up!" snapped a bearded man fiercely; then, desperately, a girl's scared voice cried: "Stop them! They're the ones, I tell you! That tall man's the one who killed Mr. Dowling!"

It was no business of Marlatt's. He had all the trouble he could handle already. But he came from Texas and, to him, that meant something. He felt

ashamed this girl had had to *ask* for help. He was white with anger when no man moved.

"Ask him!" the girl cried. "Ask him what he's got inside his shirt."

"I'll ask him!" Marlatt said, pushing his way through the crowd.

CHAPTER IV

Some Craft and Some Courage

AND stopped. Stopped short and still, with his eyes gone tight and narrow and the breath hard clogged in his throat.

"That's him—right there!" the girl cried, pointing.

It wasn't doubt that had stopped Kane Marlatt. There was only one man in that crowd she *could* mean—he had known that at once. A remote smile briefly touched Marlatt's glance that had nothing to do with either mirth or pleasure. Tall and saturnine, with a lock of red hair sweatily plastered across his forehead, bold eyes jade green against the raw brick-bronze of his cheeks, stood the last man Marlatt desired to see at that moment. Tularosa—boss of Craft Towner's gunslicks.

Shocked surprise jerked Tularosa's stare wide open. His gaunt shape shrank as though he saw a ghost.

There was irony in this thing for Marlatt. He had thought to help a frantic girl, and by that impulse had projected himself straight into the hands of the gang that had chased him across two territories and twenty-one counties—had resurrected himself right under the nose of the very man who had prosecuted that chase and had not quit till he thought him dead!

Trapped by his greed and this slip of a girl, Tularosa's plan had been to bluff this through, to convince the crowd that the girl was mistaken; that it had been someone else who had grabbed her money and killed the stage agent. But there'd been an unease in his jeering scowl, a frayed edge of worry that he couldn't quite hide.

"Boys—" he said, making his play for the crowd, "if this young lady has lost some money, there stands the walloper thet's prob'ly took it! He's a—"

Marlatt said with a cold amusement, "You're wastin' your breath. The lady's already identified you, mister—"

"She's plumb mixed up, an' no wonder! Seein' a man git killed thet close to 'er! I say by Gawd *you* took 'er money! We seen you standin' there! An' when thet fool agent went an' shot off his mouth about there bein' forty thousan'—"

Marlatt, looking at the girl, said: "Seems right queer, ma'am, he'd be knowin' so much about it if he—"

"Hell," Tularosa snarled, "we was passin' the door when the agent said it —you all but run us down gittin' out! 'F we'd knowed what you was up to we would sure as hell grabbed onto you; but I reckon it ain't too late right now. Grab 'im, Curly! We'll see by Gawd what he's got in his pockets!"

But Curly Larb didn't mind his orders. He sensed the play but he was extremely reluctant to force the issue in any such fashion. He stood his ground, scowling but hesitant to tackle a man whose gun he so dreaded.

The gaunt Tularosa swung round with an oath. "What the hell's holdin' you? Crave to see this skunk git away with 'er money?"

"Mebbe," Marlatt suggested, "he's some bothered fearin' he won't get to spend his share of it."

He ignored them then. He looked at the girl. "If you think I took your money, ma'am, you just come right out an' say so—"

"Of course you didn't!" She said

vehemently: "*That* man took it—that redheaded man! And he shot the agent because he wouldn't open the safe!"

MARLATT walked up to him. "I guess you heard that. You're a sneak and a liar, Tularosa. Hand it over."

There were growls from the crowd. Someone yelled: "Get a rope!"

Tularosa, wild with rage, was yet cunning enough to know that rage would not serve him. He jumped to a wagon seat, flung out both arms. "It's a blasted lie!" he snarled hoarsely. "Excusin' my language, but that girl don't know what she's talkin' about—I say she don't *know!* How *could* she? We seen this fella in the stage office door. Jest as we come even with it, out he come hellity larrup an' went rattlin' his hocks up a alley. We was talkin' an' I never thought nothin' of it till I seen 'im again jest now. But I *did* think there was somethin' sort of familiar about him—an' there sure as hell was! They got his picture on telegraph poles clean acrost New Mexico Territory!"

A righteous wrath had hold of his cheeks. "You know who he is? Then by Gawd, I'll tell you—*Kane Marlatt!* One of Kingfisher's right-hand men!"

Those words had sewn their wild havoc through this staring, excitable crowd. The rope enthusiast was yelling again; at the back men were pressing forward, deep growls in their throats, stealthy hands reaching back for their sixshooters.

But it was no part of Tularosa's plan to have the tables turned again. He had Kane Marlatt where he wanted him now; he should not get loose of them *this* time.

He stood upon the wagon seat, gaunt, implacable—a god of doom. He towered above them, arms raised, fists clenched, eyes wild and flashing. "You men—you've worked damn hard for what you've got—fought drought an' floods an' the goddam redskins fer a chanct to live—to raise your families here. You've sweat an' bled an' worked like dawgs to git a little stake together—to see thet your kids git the things you've missed! You goin' to pass all that over to a goddam cowthief? You've heard of Kingfisher—you know what he does when he raids a outfit!"

He leveled a trembling fist at Marlatt. "I say this feller's a spy!" he shouted. "A low-down, stinkin', sneakin' spy! He's Kingfisher's scout come here to git the lay of things. Let 'im go, by Gawd, an' inside o' three weeks you'll hev Fisher's men tearin' through this place like slaverin' wolves! Raidin', stealin', burnin', an' killin' yore women and kids!"

The crowd loosed a roar; new voices swelled the rope-shouter's chorus. Snarls twisted men's faces. Fists and guns were brandished. The beast was waking. Just a few prods more, Tularosa gauged nicely, and he'd be done with Kane Marlatt, now and forever.

He was opening his jaws for that final lashing when a bearded man in a Jim Bridger hat shoved up to the wagon, spat and peered up at him. "Y'u say they've put up his pictures orl over New Mexico?— This feller here?"

"Half the telegraph poles is sportin' 'em!"

"Damn funny," the bearded man said, "I ain't seen any. Jest come back fr'm there, mister. The on'y pictures I seen was *your'n!*"

CHAPTER V

WHITE HAIR AND HORSE BRAND

TIGHT, brittle silence clamped down on the street. There was no sound in that intense hush save the hoarse, jerky rasp of some-

body's breathing. The bearded man's talk had caught Tularosa off balance. He was a slick-talking man when his wits were working; when they weren't, when like now he was stopped full-tilt by the unexpected, he had something else to fall back on. A thing that had never failed him—*violence*.

He fell back on it now. One lifted boot took the wagon's driver square on the chin and pitched him headlong. His right hand rose with the glint of a six-gun. Flame spurted from it. The man in the Jim Bridger hat screamed and twisted; and everywhere, all about the wagon, white-faced men sprang swearing for cover.

The street was a scene of wildest confusion when Tularosa, bending, reached for the reins and saw Marlatt coming—saw his dark grinning face across the backs of the horses. He jerked his pistol round in an arc. When its bead was against Marlatt's chest he fired.

But Marlatt kept coming. The gun was worthless—shot dry; its hammer point bedded on an empty shell. In a frenzy of fury Tularosa ripped the reins from the brake handle. One of Marlatt's boots was on the wheel now, his grinning face not three feet away. Tularosa swung his gun barrel at it. Marlatt's head jerked aside and he came on up. Frantically Tularosa struck again. The wild blow slid off Marlatt's shoulder. Marlatt's hands closed tightly around his throat and a red fog blurred Tularosa's vision. Again and again he struck with his pistol, driving its barrel into the dark mist before him, striving desperately to wrench himself free. The shouts and the swearing voices faded. With the last bursting atom of his strangled strength Tularosa tried for Marlatt again. The swing of his gun barrel stopped in mid-flight. S o m e o n e grunted; and the traplike clutch of Marlatt's fingers lost their hold, clawed down his shirt-front and fell away from him. Tularosa drew one vast breath deep into his lungs. Blurred vision came back and he saw Marlatt's shape falling backward, groundward; and then it was hidden in the billowing dust and he was lashing the squealing broncs like a madman.

Marlatt, stunned by the blow from that flailing gun barrel, became gradually aware of somebody fussing with him.

Remembrance then, disjointed fragments of scene that yet hung to a pattern, clawed through the pain that was hammering his mind. With eyes jerked open he struggled to rise; but the cool hands caught at his shoulders, restraining him. A voice said practically, "Better wait a bit, cowboy, till the world quits spinning.

Queer she should know that. It was spinning all right. And his head was splitting; but he twisted it round. "I—"

He stopped, surprised—stared ludicrously at her. The hazel eyes staring back were quite friendly. But they were not the eyes of the yellow haired girl who had lost her money.

That was what stumped him. Where had *this* girl come from? What had happened to the girl in the bright red skirt—the yellow-haired girl with the little blue parasol?

THE hazel-eyed girl seemed to sense his confusion. "She's safe," she assured him. "She's gone to the bank to lock up that money—"

"Then I got it for her? I wasn't quite sure . . . Seemed like I was reaching for it when that gun barrel caught me—"

"You got it all right." There was pride and approval in the girl's hazel eyes. "You mighty near choked the gizzard right out of him—I wish you had!" She stopped then, flushed, and took her hands from his shoulders; and

Marlatt, looking up, scowled the grins from the faces of the half-dozen hombres who were still hanging round. He got up and, stooping, helped the girl to her feet.

"Where's that mountain man that—"

"They taken him down to Seth Fly's" one of the men said. "No use you goin' down there. He's deader'n a mackerel—that feller was sure chain lightnin' with a pistol. Can't see how he come to miss you—"

"Where's that fellow that was with him?" Marlatt asked. "The curly-headed one with the limp and—"

"He lit out hellbent when you jumped the other one. Some of the boys is huntin' him now."

"Don't see no one sittin' on *your* shirt tail, Marlatt retorted."

The man's eyes scowled and the edge of a flush showed above his collar. "Ain't no call fer us to go chousin' after 'im. He ain't no business of our'n—"

"Me neither," Marlatt said; and thereafter ignored them. He turned to the girl. "Could I take you someplace?

She had carrot-red hair brushed rebelliously back from piquant features that were sunbrowned, faintly freckled, a little shy but not embarrassed. She returned his scrutiny with one as frank; laughed a little and said, "Why not? I expect Shirley-Bell's about ready to go. I'm to meet her at Oliphant's—you may walk that far with me. She'll want to thank you for saving Ora's money."

"Nothing to thank me for." They turned down the Calle Real. Marlatt said: "Who's Ora?"

"Our uncle— Well, he's Shirley-Bell's uncle, really; I'm just his ward."

"Banker, is he?"

She showed a small surprise. Her hazel eyes peered up at him. "You don't *look* green—"

"Well, thanks," he smiled.

She laughed at him. "Haven't you ever heard of Ora Flack, the big cow—?" She gripped his arm. "What's the matter?"

"Nothin'," Marlatt muttered; drew the back of a hand across his eyes. "The pain, I guess. That polecat swatted me harder'n I figured." His steel gray eyes roamed the way ahead. "You was sayin'?"

"I was about to say Ora Flack's about the biggest cowman in southern Arizona. You must be new in these parts—"

"I've heard of him," Marlatt told her, and let it ride that way while he got out the makings and rolled him a smoke. He licked it; squinted up at the sun and said, "Don't suppose he'd be needin' any hands now would he?"

She thought it over. "He's got a pretty full crew—but," she added, seizing his arm impulsively, "he'd be an ingrate not to hire you after all the risk you took to save his money."

Marlatt gave her a cynical smile. "My use was over when I got back the money. I don't reckon he'll let that influence him. Well, there's the corral up yonder," he mentioned, and made as though he would turn aside.

But she wouldn't let him. "Come on," she said, again catching his arm. "At least you'll let Shirly-Bell thank you."

He hung back a moment as though thinking it over. "All right," he said reluctantly. "No need to mention that job though—no sense embarrassin' your uncle."

SHE gave him an odd look, half indignant, half amused. Then she laughed, but her dark eyes watched him with a heightened interest. "Do you know," she said, giving his arm a squeeze, "I'm not at all sure that we've rightly met. . . ."

"I beg your pardon, ma'am." He dragged off his hat. "That hombre told

at least half of the truth; my name is Kane Marlatt certain-sure. It's my right name, too," he grinned down at her.

Standing there where they'd paused in the edge of a building's shadow she saw him as a tall, dark man whose big-boned frame rendered the sinewy muscles of him inconspicuous. But strength was there; it was in the easy grace of him, in the taciturn coloring of steel-gray glance, in the way his white teeth flashed when he smiled. There was a hardness in him too, she thought; a bitter hardness that was like a wall thrust across every friendly impulse of him . . . a barrier he had raised against the world—or was it lifted only against himself?

She flushed a little, wondering if he had sensed and read her appraisal of him. She made a restless gesture with her quick, strong hands. Then she smiled. "I—I'm sure it is—Kane. And I'm Corine Malone. Cori's what everyone calls me," she said to let him know she approved him.

"Cori Malone. That's a pretty name, ma'am. An' not one I'll soon be forgettin'."

There was a lessening of the warmth in Cori's eyes and the corners of her mouth showed a little tight as she said, "Well—come on. I 'low you'll be wantin' to meet Shirly-Bell."

He did not at once move forward with her. He paused to haul match head across his Levis, to bring its cupped flame to his cigarette. When he caught up she was smiling again. She took his arm with a gay little laugh. "Something to tell one's grandchildren about—tripping the streets with a Kingfisher's man!" But he wouldn't enter into the spirit of it; his wide-lipped mouth remained sober. Cori shrugged and was taking her hand away when she felt him stop—felt his arm go stiff.

"Ain't that Miss Shirly-Bell yonder?"

She looked corralward toward where he stared; nodded, puzzled, of a sudden uneasy. "Why— What do you— Yes! that's Shirley-Bell!" and had to break into a run to keep up with him.

Marlatt said: "What's the trouble here?" and both the man and Shirly-Bell wheeled on the instant. The man was a Mexican.

"This fellow's trying to steal our team!" Shirly-Bell's eyes were resentful.

"No, senor—no try for steal not'ing! These 'orse, she's belong for me! T'ree-four—mebbe five years!"

Marlatt looked at the horse. It matched in every particular save one the bay horse standing beside it. They were a fine looking pair, well cared for and sleek despite the town's dust; as sleek as the varnished spring wagon back of them. "What's your uncle's brand?" he asked Shirly-Bell, though the brand showed plain on the horses' left hips.

"He has a separate brand for his horses," she said. "Spade, on the left hip. Everyone knows it,"

MARLATT looked at the Mexican. Both horses were c o r r e c t l y branded. He mentioned the fact.

"But, senor!" wailed the man. "Ees got my brand on 'eem too! On other side—*Mira!* Look!"

Marlatt walked around the bay horse. "Lazy T on right shoulder. That your brand?"

"Si!—Si, senor!"

"Thought all you fellers used 'picture' brands," Marlatt commented skeptically.

"I 'ave bought thees bran' from Senor Tigh Martin. Eight-ten year ago. Me—Felix Gomez! Ees recorded, senor—"

"But your brand's been crossed out. There's a bar burned through it," Marlatt told him. "You can see it yourself. You must have sold—"

"No sell! No sell, senor! Ever' time, no sell! No sell *not*'ing!" He gesticulated wildly, his dark face sullen with anger. "Ees trick, senor! Ees trick for do me out—"

"I'll tend to this," a gruff voice said, and a rough, heavy hand brushed Marlatt aside; and a big shape passed him at a rolling stride and he saw the Mexican cringe back from the man.

He was a bull-chested fellow with a muscular swell of neck and shoulders—a white-haired man, but not an old man. He said sharply, "What do you think you're doin', Gomez?" and the Mexican dragged off his battered straw hat and his eyes and his face got apologetic; but he said doggedly, defiantly:

"Senorita no got right for drive thees caballo—thees 'orse, she's mine! *Mine*, senor!" He seemed to gather courage, perhaps reassured by the sound of his voice. "*Mira*—look, senor! My brand! Ees right there on shoulder!"

As the newcomer's head turned to follow Gomez' pointing hand Marlatt got his first good look. He was young, as young as Marlatt, with burly shoulders and a bull-thick neck atop which sat a round, moon face with bold and lively features set off by twinkling eyes that were at once good-natured and masterful. He wore a mustache and goatee that were white as his hair and immeasurably added to the commanding, distinguished appearance of him.

"See there, senor? Weeth the bar through eet?"

The big man eyed the brand rather queerly, and considerably longer than Marlatt had done. It was plain he did not like it. But he shrugged and very coolly asked, "So what are you howling about? It's barred all right and there's Flack's Spade brand right above it—"

"But I deed not sell Senor Flack thees caballo! I—"

"But you'll sell the horse to me, won't you?"

The way the big man put the question showed what answer he expected; and Gomez, nervously eyeing him, at last reluctantly, nodded. "But—"

"Well now," the white-haired man observed, "I expect a hundred dollars would probably change your views considerable, wouldn't it?"

Leaving the Mexican still owlishly staring at the piece of paper he held, the white-haired man turned back to the others with a good-natured grin on his round, moon face. "Well, there you are, ladies. Simple as A, B, C."

"You shouldn't have done that, Nick," Cori said; but the big man's attention was all for the other girl, though he was polite enough to "Tut, tut," a few times. He walked over to Shirly-Bell leaving Cori regarding him thoughtfully. Marlatt, watching Cori, saw her shrug; and then her eyes came up and met him. Smiled. She said clearly then with a cool, unbreakable dignity, "Shirly-Bell, this is Kane Marlatt, who saved Uncle's money for you." And, when the yellow-haired girl looked round, "Kane, Miss Shirly-Bell Ranleigh."

Shirly-Bell came over then and held out her hand. Across her shoulder the big man regarded Marlatt with a livened interest.

Shirly-Bell said, "I'm afraid, Mr. Marlatt, I owe you a great deal more than mere words can ever repay."

MARLATT dropped her hand quickly, obviously embarrassed. "Shucks—" But whatever he might have said was lost, for Cori said quickly: "Nonsense! He needs a job, Shirly-Bell. You can tell Uncle

Ora to give him one." Without waiting for Shirly-Bell's answer, she said to the big man back of her, "Nick, this is Kane Marlatt, a Texas man. Kane, Nick Bannerman."

Bannerman strolled forward, gave Marlatt's hand a hearty clasp. There was a distinct air of power about Nick Bannerman; it rolled against Marlatt like a wave, all-engulfing and convincing. The man was a Somebody in this country. He said, cheerfully ironic, "Nuisance being a hero." He teetered his boots in the dust of the yard, considering Marlatt a moment. He said, "I'll give you a job if you're riding the grub-line."

"That's Ora's duty, Nick," Cori said coolly before Marlatt had a chance to say anything. "You've done enough for the Flacks, for one day."

Bannerman grinned. His blue eyes twinkled. "Don't ever argue with a woman, Marlatt. Looks like you're booked to ride for Ora whether you want to or not."

"And why wouldn't he want to?" Surprise looked out of Shirly-Bell's stare.

"Peace, woman!" growled Bannerman humorously and, taking her arm, helped her up into the spring wagon's seat. But Marlatt, too, wondered why he had said that. The man had laughed it off, but just the same Marlatt wondered if perhaps the adroit Mr. Bannerman had not said a bit more than he'd meant to.

Cori, without waiting for anyone's help, had climbed into the seat and was unwrapping the reins. Shirly-Bell looked around. She said in her throaty voice, "Aren't you coming?" and, with a shrug, Marlatt nodded.

"Of course he's coming," Nick Bannerman grinned. "He's got eyes, ain't he? I'll be coming out myself this evening; got to see Ora on a little business—"

"Why not come with us?"

Bannerman looked tempted but finally shook his head. "Guess not. Got a few things to see to in town first—"

"That girl in the Plaza?" Cori smiled sweetly.

Nick Bannerman chuckled. "The man that gets you's going to have his hands full. No," he said soberly, "I've got to see Doc Thompkins—"

Marlatt cut in, "I'll be gettin' my horse. Be back in a second."

Bannerman was gone when he came out with the roan.

"You can ride with us," Cori said. "Tie your horse on back."

"Perhaps Miss Ranleigh—"

"Really, there's plenty of room," smiled Shirly-Bell, moving over against Cori and shaking out her red skirt. "Come! Tell us about your adventurous life. Cori tells me you're one of Kingfisher's—"

"Cori," Marlatt said, "seems to have considerable imagination." He walked around to her side and reached up for the reins.

"I'll drive—I always do. You get in and talk with Shirly-Bell." Cori grinned at him. "Tell us about the man who tried to steal Ora's money."

There was a grim look about Marlatt's cheeks as he climbed up onto the seat beside Shirly-Bell. He said gruffly, "Don't even know him."

"Is that why you called him 'Tularosa'?" Cori said, swinging the team. "You *did*, you know— I heard you."

DRAT the girl. Marlatt felt much as Bannerman must have when she'd thrown that Plaza girl at him. He found Shirly-Bell eying him queerly. "Did you *really?*"

Marlatt nodded. "Had to call him something—"

Cori said, "Is it true what he said about your pictures being—"

Marlatt laughed. "You heard what

that mountain man said to that, didn't you?"

"But then how did he know your name was Kane Marlatt?"

Marlatt shrugged. "Better ask me somethin' easy, ma'am. I ain't much good at these riddles."

Shirly-Bell said, "You mustn't mind Cori, Mister Marlatt; she's an awful tease. She treats all the boys that way. Even Ora's range boss, Cantrell—"

"Don't you think, Mister Marlatt," cut in Cori whipping the red hair back from her face, "that Shirly-Bell ought to be more served in the way she takes up with strangers? Not that Nick isn't the soul of honor, but—I mean, considering and all that we don't hardly *know* him? Course he's handsome enough and—"

"Now, Cori. I'm sure Mister Marlatt is not interested in our private opinions of other people. After all, you know, Mister Bannerman's a gentleman and has always been very friendly toward you. It does you no credit talking behind his back that way."

"Well," Cori, with a spoiled-child air, declared, "I always say—"

"Really, you've said quite enough, dear."

Marlatt grinned. "Who is thet Bannerman, anyway?"

"A business acquaintance of Ora's," Shirly-Bell said in her mission-chime voice. "He's a ranchman from over in the Altar Valley—off there to the west beyond those mountains. He has a fine place, they say, though rather too isolated to ever be worth much—"

"Too inaccessible," chirped Cori; and Marlatt laughed at the yellow-haired girl's exasperated sigh. She proved a good sport by laughing too.

"But really," she said, "Nick's a nice boy and I hope you'll like him. I'd like for you two to be good friends; if you take a job at Straddle Bug—that's the name of our ranch—"

"Ora's ranch," Cori said.

"Yes, dear," Shirly-Bell said; and to Marlatt: "You'll probably see quite a lot of each other."

"You'll get tired of him as I am," Cori assured him; and Marlatt, seeing the color edge Shirly-Bell's cheeks, felt an instant sympathy for her. He frowned at Cori. He could well imagine Shirly-Bell's feelings, being plagued this way in front of a stranger.

He found himself comparing the girls. They were as different, he thought, as night from day. Cori, redhaired and freckled, over forward and impudent, uncaringly clad in levis and Stet hat with a boy's flannel shirt tightly showing her curves; a tomboy, and shameless, making fun of her betters.

"Well," Cori said a little tartly, "you might's well get out. This's the end of the line. We don't go no farther," and Marlatt, thus rudely jerked back to stern reality, looked up to find them stopped before the gypsumed walls of a low, adobe ranch house. He helped Shirly-Bell down but would not look at her—*dared* not, lest she see or sense the dismal hunger in him. She was a woman who would someday make some man immensely happy. Would that man know his luck? Would he take her and keep her?—would he have the wit to thank God for his blessing?

Marlatt sighed.

She was not for him—nor for any other damned gun throwing ranny who knew no home but the seat of his saddle.

He squared broad shoulders, turned his windburned cheeks toward the man who stood watching from the ranch house doorway.

"Have a nice trip, girls?"

Cori said, "We damn near lost your money, Ora. You'll want to thank this fellow—he's the one that saved it."

"Mr. Marlatt," Shirly-Bell said. "This is my uncle, Ora Flack."

Marlatt stood there stiffly, eyes hard and bitter on the man Craft Towner had hired him to kill.

CHAPTER VI

STRADDLE BUG

FLACK came off the porch with extended hand. But Marlatt appeared to be entirely occupied with twisting up a smoke and the rancher, faintly frowning, put the snubbed hand back in his pocket. When his cigarette satisfied him Marlatt looked up and met the cattleman's eyes.

Ironic humor faintly twisted Marlatt's lips as he saw a darkness come into Flack's eyes. The cattleman was offended, and only the fact of Marlatt's being a guest here was keeping the man from retaliating; Marlatt read that in the fleeting narrowness of the man's surprised stare. Evidently his dignity was a much more serious thing to Flack than the dollars Marlatt had saved him.

"Glad to make your acquaintance, Marlatt. I'm in your debt, sir."

"You owe me nothing," Marlatt drawled, coolly tossing his words across the other's speech. "What I did was done for your niece—entirely."

Flack's deep, wide chest showed a quickened breathing. But he smiled it off. "Then I'll thank you for—"

"Miss Ranleigh's thanks were entirely adequate," Marlatt said; and was at a loss to understand this antagonism Flack had roused in him.

It was Flack's hard-held calm, his control of himself that saved the situation. He bowed with a brief civility. "At least you'll not tear off till you've rested your horse—"

"Wasn't thinking of leaving," Marlatt cut in. "I came out here to wangle a job."

Flack hung poised by the porch with suspended breath. Then his shoulders loosened and a hard kind of smile cracked the lips back away from his teeth. "For a job, eh? Well! I must confess I was beginning to wonder . . . However, we can talk of that later. You'll want to see my range boss, Cantrell. He'll be round someplace come chuck time. Meantime," he said, and a faint hint of irony got its claws in his smile, "help your horse to some feed an' set comfortable."

Marlatt looked after him thoughtfully as Flack followed the girls into the house. With a shrug then he climbed back up on the wagon and drove the team across to the stable. While he was unharnessing and currying them he tried to rationalize the preverse impulse that had governed him during his words with the rancher. His attitude had not made sense, and he knew it. Getting tough with Flack wouldn't buy him anything. He'd come out here, and at considerable risk, to warn the man. Not to browbeat or start a feud with him, but to warn him of Towner's intentions. Even while clearing out of Craft Towner's country, he had deliberately turned his flight this way that he might drop by Flack's and warn the man. It had been just that same intention which had prompted his job-hunting talk with Cori Malone.

THE horses cared for, Marlatt crossed to the shade of the bunkhouse and put his back to the cool adobes. A smoke might help, he mused; and shaped one, tapering it up with a thoughtful frown. What was there, he wondered, about Ora Flack that should so rouse a man's antagonism? Was it something in the fellow's look?

He broke off the thought. There was someone coming. It was Cori. She

came round the corner like she was hunting something, and when she saw him she stopped. There was considerable indignation in her look.

"What were you trying to do—start a fight?"

Marlatt grinned. "I expect it *did* kind of look that way—"

"Look that way!" Cori stared. Then, stormily: "Do you know what Ora ask—"

"Oh! Pardon me," exclaimed Shirly-Bell, rounding the corner and abruptly stopping. She stood looking from one to the other. A faintly apologetic smile swayed her lips. "Uncle Ora wants you, Cori, dear."

"Damn!" Cori said inelegantly and, with a quick-flashing look at Marlatt's face she went tramping off.

The back of the bunkhouse faced the corral and from where he leaned Marlatt could watch the eight or ten horses penned there; but he wasn't. He was watching Shirly-Bell. A regard the girl appeared to be returning with a larger interest than she'd before accorded him.

She was a reserved girl, even with those whom she liked, he guessed; and was by no means certain he fell in that category. Though he hoped he did. She drew him strangely—as strangely and strongly as her uncle repelled him. There was that lure in her.

He said, "You've got a nice layout here."

"Do you think so?" She smiled and all of the lines of her face changed. Then the smile fell away and she said soberly, "Are you really wanting a job with Ora?"

Marlatt shrugged. "Expect I could work for him as well as anyone."

"It isn't that. I mean . . . you talked so strange—almost as if you hated him someway. As if — But you don't, do you?"

"Why should I?" Marlatt dissembled. "This is the first time I ever saw him."

She said, "I believe you do!" She took a deep breath then. "Why did you come over here?" Her eyes roved his faded gear as though she might find her answer that way. "Why?" Her voice was insistent now. "Don't tell me it was because we asked you."

Marlatt appeared to debate with himself. He said finally, wryly: "Why does a man do anything?"

But she brushed that away. "You don't want a job here. You came for something else." She reached forward swiftly and slapped at his pocket.

Marlatt's eyes shone coldly mocking. "You won't be findin' no stars pinned on me."

"You're no line-riding drifter!" She said of a sudden on an altered note: "You're a gun thrower!" and caught up her red skirt and ran for the house.

GUN thrower. Marlatt stood awhile, unseeing glance on the dust of his boots. Queer how the ways of a man's life caught up with him. She must have sharp eyes.

"Gun thrower!" He said it over again—as she had; and wheeled impatiently with a lift of his shoulders. The crew was coming. He could hear their hoof sound whacking the yard and the smell of their dust was a close, pungent thing.

He went around to the front of the bunkhouse and settled himself on a bench by the door. He was there when the crew came from penning their horses. Five of them, lathered and dusty, unshaved and uncaring. They came trooping round the bunkhouse corner, falling queerly silent when they noticed him sitting there. A stocky man well in front of the others came to a stop and put down his saddle. "Hmmm," he observed, looking Marlatt over. "New man?"

Meeting the man's inquiring gaze

Marlatt shrugged. "Dunno. I'm waitin' on the top screw now."

"You're lookin' at him. I'm the range boss here. Name's Cantrell."

"Glad to know you," Marlatt mentioned without getting up. "Mine's Marlatt."

"Where'd you say you were from?"

"Didn't say."

Cantrell's neck tipped a little forward. He regarded Marlatt with a narrowed stare. "Where *are* you from?"

Marlatt grinned. "You reckon that would effect the caliber of my work?"

Cantrell did not grin back. He seemed faintly bothered by Marlatt's words. He continued to stand there studying him. A bull-chested man with a blue, square jaw that ran flat to his ears and a nose that was hooked like an eagle's.

Abruptly he shrugged and, without comment, strode past in the direction of the cook shack, in whose open door a man in an apron stood beating a dishpan. Three of the other men tramped along after him. The fourth, a small and hungry-looking man, tossed his hull on the kak-pole and winked at Marlatt. "Looks like chuck's ready. Better come an' set."

"Wouldn't want to make the rest of you short."

The small man stared after Cantrell and spat. "There's times," he drawled, "when it's plumb gratifyin' to be sho't. I'm Oxbow Rand—glad to know you, mister."

Marlatt got up and shook Rand's fist. "You must feel kinda lost in this here outfit."

"A man," Rand observed, looking after the others, "can't always cut the herd he travels with."

"I expect that's so," answered Marlatt gravely. "Culls are mostly a matter of a man's opinion."

"I can see you been around," Rand said.

The others were eating when they entered the grub shack. They took vacant places at one end of the long table. Food disappeared without much talk.

With hunger satisfied the men drifted outside to roll smokes and talk. Rand and Marlatt hunkered down in the shade of a tamarix. The three other hands took seats on the bench beside the door. After a time Cantrell came out and stopped by them, listening. Their discussion seemed to center on the small events of the day's work. "I ain't been here always," Rand mentioned. "Used to be wagon boss for Miz' Cori's dad."

Marlatt said, "Kin of Flack's, was he?"

"Just a friend, I reckon; though there's some as claims they was distant relations. Anyway, in his will Ol' Tom named Flack her guardian." He squinted off across the blue shadowed range. "She'll come of age nex' month an' things'll be different."

Marlatt's quick glance at the man found Rand's dark eyes fixed upon him, bright with meaning. Rand said guardedly, "I ain't one to shoot off my mouth or tell any man how to play his hand, but I'd sure take it kindly 'f you could see your way to stickin' round here a spell. "I—"

HE LET it ride; commenced shaping a smoke. Marlatt, looking up, saw Cantrell approaching. There was something dark and suspicious in the range boss' regard. He observed then how the other men, the rest of the crew, had stopped their talk and were watching.

"Rand," the range boss said, "go hitch up a team"; and Rand, with a nod, got up and walked stableward. The range boss looked down at Marlatt then. "So you're wantin' a job on this spread, eh, bucko?"

Marlatt stood up. "Well," he said,

hitching up his belt, "I could sure use some work."

"We're particular who we hire around here."

"Don't blame you—don't blame you at all," Marlatt smiled. "Fella's got to be with all this misbranded stock runnin' round."

Cantrell said very soft: "What do you mean, misbranded stock?"

"Why, it looks to me like somebody's been almighty careless—"

"What're you gettin' at?"

"If you don't know, I'd say it's high time this outfit was hirin' a boss that come up to his job."

The rest of the crew had drifted over. They were spread out now just back of the boss, thumbs hooked to gun belts, shoulders tipped, eyes glinting, ready to back any play Cantrell started.

Cantrell's face was the color of liver. His bull chest swelled and a bloated look got into his cheeks. "Why, you goddam sa—"

It wasn't Marlatt's look that stopped him. Marlatt's look had not changed by the slightest. Cold sweat made a shine across Cantrell's forehead. He licked stiff lips. But he dared not move with that cold, hard thing shoved against his belly. That quick had his belligerence wilted.

Very dry Marlatt asked, "What was that you was sayin'?"

"I—uh—" New color flooded the range boss' cheeks. "Expect I was talkin' a—a little bit wild-like . . ."

"Why, that's comin' it down right han'some," grinned Marlatt. "Guess you was steppin' over to say I been put on the payroll."

Cantrell's eyes rolled. A pulse at his temple was swollen and purple. He might, with luck, catch a hold on his gun, but he knew in his bones he'd never get to use it. No hand could be quicker than a gun at your ribs; and that hard thing was making a dent in his belly.

He groaned; almost gagged when he swallowed. "I—uh— Yes! I was!" he whispered.

Marlatt laughed and stepped back. Both his hands were empty. He'd made a fool of Cantrell with nothing more dangerous than an index finger.

Out of the tail of his eye Marlett watched the crew. An edge of his glance caught a new figure watching, swung a bit and picked up another. He got out his Durham, shook some into a paper. Drawstrings gripped in white teeth he was shutting the sack when somebody said softly sighing: "Well!"

That was Rand. Marlatt knew by the vast satisfaction so plain in the word. He curled his smoke and looked at Cantrell. The man's face was livid.

"Out-thought an' outshot," someone summed up the situation.

AND still another voice said, "Expect Cantrell will be seekin' new pastures." It was significant, Marlatt thought, of the range boss' changed status, that he had been referred to by name. The speaker had not called him "boss." Marlatt, seeing Cantrell's glowering eyes, grinned a little, maliciously. He was enjoying the man's discomfiture and would just as lief he knew it.

Obviously Cantrell did. His cheeks were black with fury and his twisted mouth made gasping sounds like a fish new-yanked from water. Abruptly, Cantrell spun on his heel and a rolling stride took him out of sight beyond the saddle shack corner.

A pants-scraped match lit Marlatt's smoke. He was comfortably inhaling, back propped against the tree, when Oxbow Rand drifted over. "You've got a hard way, friend," Rand told him.

Marlatt pinwheeled his smoke through the thickening dusk. "I find it pays to learn right away if a dog's all bark or got bite in him."

"Don't you make no mistake, boy.

That vinegarroon's got plenty bite. Don't let him get behind you none."

"Shucks. Where I come from they wouldn't call him baby frightener." Marlatt changed the subject. There was a wild idea roving through his head and, getting his back more comfortably against the time-roughed bark of the pepper, he said, "I've about made up my mind to oblige you. Air round this way is right salubrious. You said the red-headed girl was a ward of Flack's. How long?"

"Six-seven year."

"Hmmm. Didn't they never find out about her father's death?"

In the dusk Rand's glance looked peculiar. "'How you mean?"

"Ain't they never found out who killed him?"

Rand took a long look roundabout. "Who told you Cori's dad was killed?"

Marlatt's grunt was expressive. "You can't tell wagon ruts from snake track here. If you want my help—"

"It ain't about that I'm wantin' it. You're off on the wrong foot, Marlatt. Cori's old man was killed by a horse—he always was a fool for buyin' bad broncs. He'd go six hundred miles to git hold of one no other guy'd touch with a ten-foot pole."

"Nice setup. Where are they now?"

"Flack got rid of 'em when he took over—"

"An' what's become of the property? Where's her land?"

"Flack throwed it in with the rest of his holdin's—"

"Cattle, too?"

Rand nodded.

"What happened to her buildin's?"

"Flack's usin' 'em for a line camp—"

"An' you think the ol' man got killed by a horse?"

But Rand's voice was stubborn. "You can't go against the facts," he growled doggedly. "Dammit, d'you think fer one holy minute—"

But Marlatt said, "With an outfit big as that at stake—"

"Big as what? I never said—"

"You didn't have to. If it wasn't big you wouldn't be here; you'd not of hung round in this polecat's burrow—"

"Makes no diff'rence," the short man muttered. "First off I had the same idea; I said 'By Gawd, this business stinks!' But I'm tellin' you now, there wasn't one thing wrong. Tom Malone was killed by a outlaw bronc—"

He broke off and turned, shoulders stiffening.

A man said out of the blur of shadows: "Marlatt? The Ol' Man wants t' see you—up at the house. Right away."

CHAPTER VII

Death Grabs a Gun Thrower

FLACK'S eyes traveled Marlatt's frame with a cold, hard searching. They returned to his face without approval. "You show your trade, friend."

Marlatt shrugged but did not comment.

"Not many, hunting a job," Flack said, "would have used your way."

Marlatt chuckled. "Got onto it, did you?"

"I watched you make a fool of Bob Cantrell in front of his men."

"I didn't make a fool of him—he was that already. All I did was let him prove it."

"I don't suppose," said Flack grimly, "it occurred to you that you might be undermining the man's authority—"

"That," Marlatt grinned, "was what I aimed to do."

Quick and black was the look of Flack's cheeks. "So you did it deliberately! Deliberately went out of your

way to wreck the authority of a man I've been dependent on—"

"Shouldn't put your weight on such a weak reed. Course I did it deliberately. Allowed you'd be seein' that straight off."

"I see it now!" Flack snarled.

"Doubt if you do." Marlatt's look was insolent. "I don't do things just to be doin'. I broke Cantrell, mister, because I want Cantrell's job."

"You *what!*"

"You hear all right, Flack. I said I want Cantrell's job. You'll be needin' a range boss, an' here I am just shaped to your needs. Your move, ain't it?"

Flack's eyes took on a shoe-button polish.

"Do you think I'd trust you after this?"

Marlatt shrugged. "You got to trust someone an' trust 'em damn quick."

"More of your riddles. What are you drivin' at now?"

"The riddle ain't mine till you've made me range boss—or if it is, it wouldn't need to be then." Marlatt met Flack's eyes straightly. "There's some curious things goin' on around here . . . a matter of brands, if you get what I mean."

Flack's narrowed stare met his straightly. "Brands?"

"Brands," Marlatt smiled. He spoke of Gomez and the Mexican's remarks at Oliphant's corral. "The horse in question," Marlatt said, "was one of the pair your niece was drivin'. A bay. They were both bays—pretty good lookin' ones."

"Well?" Flack said.

"I don't know whether it is or not. This fellow Bannerman paid Gomez for the horse. Seems to me though, if I was you, I'd be doin' some tall thinkin'."

Flack sat back in his chair and looked at him, his bearded face quite smooth and expressionless. "What do *you* think?"

"I haven't decided." Marlatt moved his right hand, absently rubbed his holster. "I'd have to know more about it before I made up my mind. Not sure I'm interested." He added reflectively, "I could be, though."

"I see." Flack said very softly: "You aim to be, don't you?"

A hard smile curved Marlatt's lips. "Your show, ain't it?"

"You're a brash and reckless man, friend Marlatt."

"Just the kind you need in your string."

Flack snorted; hauled himself up out of his chair.

"The time book's in Cantrell's shack. You can pay him off . . . I'll go with you," Flack grunted.

IT WAS full dark now with the stars silver-streaking the deep-purple heavens and the lamplight driving yellow bars across the loamy blackness of the yard. They were about to step off the porch, with the lamplit door standing open behind them, when a quick yell slammed across the yard and a rifle spoke out of the shadows. The bullet passed between the two stopped men, only missing Marlatt by inches; and a cowboy's boots somewhere hammered sound from the packed adobe. Through that noise Marlatt drove his shot, firing at the other man's muzzle flash. He stood then, forward tipped, for a long still moment before he put away his pistol and stepped off the porch.

Flack's hand reached after him. "Wait!—*wait*, you fool!"

Marlatt's head came round impatiently. "What for?"

"You might have miss—"

Marlatt's laugh was short. He said, "I don't miss, Flack!" and strode off into the unrelieved gloom of the tree-thickened murk by the pole corrals.

"Get a lantern, somebody," Flack's

lifted voice growled into the shadows; and when the crew came with one he snatched it out of the fellow's hand and hurried corralward, the rest trooping after him.

By the poles they stopped. The circle of radiance cut across a man's boots.

"Rand," Marlatt's voice said out of the darkness, "you can unhitch that team. Cantrell won't be needin' it."

CHAPTER VIII

"Too Damn Slick to Be Honest!"

NEW shapes joined the group about the lantern. There was a muttered oath and a man quickly said: "Better go on back to the house, girls. This ain't no kind of business for you to be looking at." A heavier, demanding voice growled: "What's going on here?" and there was a swift flurry of movement with some of the group giving back away from it and Shirley-Bell said with the right of authority, "I've got—" and stopped there suddenly, choked and startled; and from close by Marlatt, Cori observed, "Feet first. With his boots on. I told him that's the way it would be."

Somebody raised the lantern. A broad, heavy shape bent above Cantrell's body. Silence clamped the gathering then, and thickened when the man stood up and raked it with a narrowed stare. "Who shot this fellow?"

"It's all right, Nick," Ora Flack said quietly.

The burly man said, "I'll be judge of that. Which one of you shot him?"

Flack's men stood silent, dark faces expressionless.

"It's no good, Nick," Flack smiled at him faintly. "Bob got what he asked for—"

"I'll decide that. You're takin' this mighty cool, ain't you, Flack? I always thought owners took up for their men." The big man leaned forward, his glance sharp and searching. "What are you tryin' to hold out on me, Ora?"

"Come off it, Nick. I've got nothing to hide—"

"Glad to hear it. Better tell me then—"

Marlatt said: "*I* shot him."

"So you've found your goddam tongue at last!"

With the swing of his head, light from the lifted lantern struck full across the big man's face. It was a face Marlatt recognized. Bannerman's— the man who that morning in Oliphant's corral had paid for the Spade-branded bay.

Bannerman said, "I thought it would be you. What have you got to tell me, bucko?"

"I haven't got to tell you anything, mister. I don't even admit your right to ask questions. Who are *you* to be shovin' your weight around?"

Coldly and thoroughly the man looked him over, then brushed back his coat with the flat of a hand. There was a wink of light from the metal pinned there. "That convince you?"

"Okey—you're sheriff. Start spoutin' your questions."

"First off, bucko, I'll have your name —your *right* name this time."

Marlatt hung onto his temper, and when he spoke his reply was leavened by these reflections; by these and by the knowledge that there *were* gaps in his gunfighting past that he'd as lief were not brought up again. He said, "Kane Marlatt *is* my real name, Bannerman."

"Yeah?"

"You'll have to take my word for it."

"An' supposin' I don't?"

Marlatt shrugged. Folding his arms he leaned against the corrals peeled bars and waited.

"Hold on a minute," Flack inter-

rupted, moving forward into the lantern light. "No need of the girls having to listen to this; take Cori into the house, Shirly-Bell." He looked around, said abruptly: "No need of you boys losing sleep out here, either. Couple of you see to burying Cantrell; there's shovels in the harness shed and—Oh! One other thing! Till I say different, you'll be taking your orders from Marlatt now. I'm naming him range boss in Cantrell's place."

BANNERMAN'S head came coldly round and he fixed a displeased stare on Flack. Marlatt saw a flush cross his cheeks, and the glint of amusement that brightened Flack's eyes as Flack said, "We might's well be using my office for this. No harm being comfortable while we thrash this thing out. Come along, Nick. I've a box of cigars fresh in from the Coast and—"

Marlatt had to admire Flack's cool effrontery, the patent ease with which he shepherded Bannerman into the house and shut the door and, for privacy, barred it.

"Now," Flack smiled, "just what have you got against Marlatt, Nick?"

"I ain't got nothing against him—personally," admitted Bannerman frowning. "I've no more against him than I'd have against any other gun thrower who come churning in here looking for trouble—"

"You been looking for trouble, Marlatt?" Flack asked, winking.

"I've got troubles enough without—"

"Exactly!" growled Bannerman, lowering his boots and setting his glass down. The slant of his cheeks showed a plain distrust. "I knew it! What are they? Who you running from?"

A stillness came on. Flack started to say something but the sheriff waved him back. "You've cut in enough, Ora." His shoulders lifted and he eyed Marlatt darkly.

"Where you from, bucko?"

"Off east a piece—"

"'East a piece' is a damn big country. *Where* east?"

"I don't see," Marlatt drawled, "that it's any of your business."

Nick Bannerman's stubborn jaw jumped forward. He banged the desk with a heavy fist. "Mebbe," he said, "I'll *make* it my business!"

"Your privilege," Marlatt told him; and some wicked impulse made him add: "You won't be the first man tonight that's tried that."

Ruddy color pounded the sheriff's round cheeks. Temper slimmed his eyes to pale slits. "Meanin' Cantrell, eh?"

"Meanin' Cantrell, mister."

"I can lock you up for that little stunt."

"Think so?"

Nick Bannerman swore; started up from his chair, but Flack shoved him back. "Cantrell's out, Nick—"

"Who says so?"

"I do. You can't arrest a man for defending his life. Cantrell got in first shot. He was using a rifle—firing from ambush."

The sheriff's brows went up. He sat back in his chair, very calm, very thoughtful. "Well now," he said, "that's mighty interesting. Why would he be doing that, I wonder?" Glance suddenly sharpening, he said, "Bucko, where have you known Bob Cantrell before?"

Marlatt said, "I never saw Cantrell till I came out here."

"People don't go round gunning folks just to be doing."

Marlatt shrugged. "I expect he had his reasons—"

"Exactly! What were they?"

Marlatt, about to remark that he hadn't inquired, caught Flack's warning glance. He said instead: "We passed a few words by the bunkhouse this eve-

ning. I guess Cantrell figured he'd lost face with the crew."

"And why would he be getting such an odd kind of notion?"

"He had it in mind to put Kane off the ranch, and Kane," Flack said, taking a hand again, "not only called his bluff but polished it off by compelling Cantrell to hire him."

"Hmmm. Compelling him, eh. How?

Flack grinned. "He shoved a finger into Bob's ribs. Bob figured it was a pistol—"

"Very slick," drawled Bannerman. "Very slick indeed." He studied Marlatt with a narrowed stare. "In fact the more I see of this drifter the slicker he appears to be." He said very softly, watching Marlatt, "What made you decide to come west so sudden?"

"Was it sudden?"

FLACK growled: "Now listen, Nick—this kind of talk's gone far enough. There's no damn need of you two fussin'. I've always looked on you as a pretty good friend but I'm not lettin' *anyone* tell me how to run Straddle Bug. Marlatt's my range boss and I'm standin' behind him. *All the way.* Understand?"

Flack smiled, but there was a look in his eyes that made big Nick Bannerman hesitate. "Seems like you're settin' a heap of store by this fellow. I would think you'd want to know more about him—"

"If I'm suited, you ought to be," Flack said. "Any guy that can bluff a tough ranny like Bob with nothin' more terrible than a stiff finger is my idea of a man to tie to—"

"*I'*d say a fellow like that was a damn good bet to keep your eye on," Bannerman differed, glowering at Marlatt. "In fact, I think I'll just take him on in—he's much too damn slick to be honest!"

CHAPTER IX

TALKING TALENT

BANNERMAN'S lips had thinned below the glint of his eyes. Tipped forward he was, on the edge of his chair, with a big fist curled tight round his gun butt. A breath, it seemed, would have touched him off, so cocked and gone dark was the look of him.

"By God," Flack said, "I won't have it! You hear, Nick? Get your paw off that gun and act sensible!"

"I am actin' sensible." The sheriff's lips barely moved in that stiff, set face; dogged stubbornness stamped every line of it. "There's somethin' almighty peculiar here and I aim to get to the bottom of it. This guy drifts in like a tumbleweed, plumb humpin' along out of nowhere. He shows up at Oliphant's on one of Joe's horses, which he claims he borrowed from Hartsell. I took the trouble to ride out there this morning and there don't neither of them know hide nor hair of it.

"That ain't all. He buys a horse at Oliphant's, and leaves it there and walks up the street—afoot. Why? Who ever heard of a cowhand walkin'? Slick, that's what he is—so slick fresh butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. You know what he done then? He went meandering up the Calle Real and just naturally pirooted slap-dab into the windup of that stage office stick-up—just like that.

"You know what I think?" Bannerman's voice was silky soft now. "I think this whole damn business was a put-up job. I think him an' this Tularosa guy was working hand an' glove with each other—"

"Now that's plain crazy," Flack cut in. "This murdering holdup *stole* the money; Marlatt jumped him and got

it back—"

"Exactly!" Bannerman's eyes glinted satisfaction. "One of 'em stole it, the other got it back! Getting down to cases, don't that strike you as a little too pat? Don't it seem uncommon odd to you that neither of 'em jerked a pistol? That in the subsequent tussle the one got away and the other saved your money? That in the entire fracas neither one of 'em got hurt?"

"That hombre *did* jerk a pistol, so your whole case falls through," Marlatt quietly observed. "He killed a man, didn't he? Killed two men, in fact—Dowling, the express clerk, and that hide-hunter in the Jim Bridger hat. And if you don't think a gun-barrel hurts a man you better feel of my skull."

"That!" scoffed Bannerman, and snorted. "Didn't keep you from getting out here, I notice. Didn't keep you from playin' the hero and settin' yourself in solid with Straddle Bug—didn't keep Miss Shirly-Bell from getting Ora here to give you a job!"

There was a hard, hating light in the sheriff's slimmed stare and Marlatt, striving to account for it, was caught off balance by the man's sudden move. With a rasp of steel on leather Bannerman got his gun out and its focus took Marlatt's picture.

"Unbuckle your belt, friend, and get out of that hardware."

"Here — just a m i n u t e," Flack growled, beard bristling. "You're out of your depth, Nick; a long ways out—"

"He's got a damn suspicious mind," Marlatt muttered.

"Never you mind about my mind. Just get yourself shucked of that gun belt, mister—"

"Now look," Flack said, "let's be reasonable—"

" 'Reasonable' is my middle name, Ora," declared the sheriff, grinning coldly. "If you can convince me—"

"I CAN," Flack said, and cursed the luck audibly. "I hadn't figured to say anything but this pigheaded play of yours has forced my hand. Marlatt here is an undercover agent. I had to pull a lot of strings to get him here and I'm not going to see you lug him off to no jail. You're a friend of mine, Nick, and I didn't want to hurt you, but when the law breaks down it's time for a man to take his own measures. Marlatt is the measure I'm taking. He's come out here to put a stop to whoever's smart wangling is trying to wreck this spread!

"Now wait! You've had your say; I'm entitled to mine. I admit your right to suspicion; I can show you, however, that the curious circumstances which have aroused it are nothing but a chain of coincidences.

"I sent for Marlatt three weeks ago —long before *I* could, or *he* could, have known anything about Shirly-Bell's trip with that cattle money. As a matter of fact, I only made up my mind to *buy* the cattle last night. The essential facts are these: somebody's out to bust up this ranch; the same somebody is not only stealing my cattle in wholesale numbers, but is taking steps to make me out a *cowthief* as well! Witness that Spade-branded bay you so kindly bought for me this morning—why I never *saw* that damned horse before! Where did it come from? How did it get into the corral with my own stock? Who is it that's being so generous to me with other people's animals?"

Flack leaned forward and glared at the sheriff. "That's only a patch to what's been happening. One thing has been clear to me a good long while. Whoever it is that's out to get me has got at least *one* man planted right here in my outfit—it's the only way any

outsider could have known about me sending in that money this morning. And I think I know who the polecat was. He got wise to me some way—or got wise to Marlatt. He got rattled; made an issue of Marlatt's hiring when all he had to do was what he finally did anyway—squat down in the dark with a loaded rifle."

"You're talking about Bob Cantrell?"

"I am, Nick. Bob Cantrell, I'm convinced, has been drawing his pay from two different sources. I've had him now a little under a year; he brought fine references—I should have had the wit to check them—"

"Have you checked up on this guy?"

"Important people have vouched for Kane Marlatt—"

"Yeah. That stickup vouched for him—"

"Don't be a goddam fool!" Flack said irritably. "I got in touch with these people and they *suggested* Marlatt—"

"But how do you know this guy is Marlatt?"

Flack stared, looked exasperated and said with a scowl, "Now look here, Nick; I've argued the matter long enough. *You* know I been losing stock; the business of that bay should have shown you what sort of methods are being used against me. I've asked you to do something time and again. If these polecats are too smart for you—too clever at hiding their tracks for you to flush 'em out into the open, then you've no complaint if I go outside for someone to put a stop to the business. You can't expect me to twiddle my thumbs and watch myself made a bankrupt."

He gave the sheriff an earnest regard. "Come on now, show you're a sport and shake hands with Marlatt. Between us, if we work together, we may be able to nab these polecats."

The sheriff said slow and consideringly, "so you think there's more than one of them, do you?"

"I don't know," Flack grumbled; "but I'll bust 'em up if it's the last thing I do! Nobody can run that devil brand on me an' expect to—"

"All right, trouble shooter," Bannerman grinned at Marlatt. "I'll shake your hand an' I'll wish you luck—I've an idea you're going to need it."

And Marlatt, looking deep in the star-packer's eyes, had a hunch that was no vain prediction.

CHAPTER X

"You Better Go While You're Lucky"

MANY thoughts drummed for Marlatt's attention as he crossed the shadows of the starlit yard to take up his quarters in the foreman's shanty. But the thing intriguing him most just then was the remarkable defense Ora Flack had built for him. Why? What was back of it? A lot of fine words neatly woven together but without any truth to keep them that way—unless you counted Flack's mention of Marlatt as an undercover agent. He had been that when he'd wormed his way into Craft Towner's outfit; but Flack would not know that—he was making it up to hold off the sheriff. Could this, Marlatt wondered, be the result of those hints he'd let drop concerning misbranded cattle? Or was there something much darker, much deeper, behind it?

He was partway across the great tree-shadowed yard when remembrance of his bedroll stopped and turned him. It was in the bunkhouse. The place was dark; but Marlatt swung that way,

slow walking, still thinking.

The bunkhouse door had been left open to lure what breeze later hours might bring.

He had left his bedroll on the farthest bunk. He had crossed but a groped, scant part of that distance when he stopped abruptly, one foot still lifted. Some warning in the feel of this place had got through his thinking. Nerves cocked, he listened; and was that way, off balance, when the crew piled on him.

A smashing blow rocked the side of his head. A flying fist caught him hard in the ribs and drove him gasping against a bunk. Half blinded, sick, he was doubled there, retching, when a swung boot's heel gouged a path of flame across a check already laid open and bleeding. Some man's wild hope sailed across his shoulder and stopped at the wall with a meaty impact; that fellow's crazed yell slicing through this uproar like a knife through butter. And then Marlatt's hands found a hold on the bunk and he braced himself, stopping the next man's rush with a lifted knee. The man's shape dropped like a busted bag.

Marlatt pulled a deep breath into him and bent with both hands scraping the floor to find some thing he could use for a weapon, in his rage forgetting the belted gun at his hip. His search found nothing, but the bending saved him; for just as he stooped something thin, something glinting, whistled the murk where he'd just been crouching. Window glass jangled down in burst fragments, striking the floor with a dry-paper crackle. Some fool then was letting a gun off, filling the place with its smell of cordite, furiously spraying the walls with his bullets; the flame of those shots licking out like snakes' tongues.

Marlatt, low to the floor with a knee braced under him, kept their tally; and when the fifth blast drove its shot through the tumult he launched himself straight at the man, coming off the floor like a bow-sped arrow. His hatless head took the man in the middle, smashing him solidly against the wall, the shock shaking the building.

Eyes streaming then from the smart of powder smoke, Marlatt whirled and ragefully waited. Somewhere a man shifted weight on the floor's squealing boards, and off to the right some other man's diminishing groans grew fainter and fainter.

Then Rand's voice, thick with panting, said: "Marlatt?"

But Marlatt, with his back to the wall, stood tightly still and watched a man's shape come up off the floor three feet away and silhouette itself against the vague rectangle of the shattered window. Hard-holding his breath, Marlatt waited till the man's wide shoulders came almost straight, then he yanked his gun and went diving forward. That wall-braced spring took the man in the chest and bowled him backward, folding him struggling and spluttering across a bunk's blankets. Marlatt's gun-barrel took him across the head and he went completely limp.

THE fight was ended.

"Strike a light," Marlatt growled; and out of the blackness came Rand's soft curse and the tramp of his boots as he crossed the warped planking. He got a bracket lamp lit.

The place looked like a cyclone had struck it. One man lay tangled in a bunk's splintered wreckage. There was another one huddled in an angle of the wall, slackly sprawled there, chin chested, shirt in tatters. Wabbly braced on hands and knees the third member of Cantrell's crew was by the overturned table, groaning and shaking and thoroughly sick.

Rand's stare found Marlatt. He was

in the room's center, hunched there slump-shouldered, a battered shape in the lamp's yellow glow. He had a pistol still gripped in one down-flopped hand and clotting blood was a smear on his face. He met Rand's look and shrugged tired shoulders.

Rand looked about to speak but broke off, eyes narrowed. Marlatt, following that stare, wheeled and saw the group in the doorway. He grinned at them toughly. "Sorry, folks — the show's over."

Cori was there, her eyes round with fright. There was an odd sort of something crowding Shirly-Bell's look and Flack's hooded stare was a cool thing, inscrutable. The sheriff said: "You've smacked your last man around this place, bucko. Drop that gun an' grab for the rafters!"

Oxbow Rand took a hand. "Keep your shirt on, Nick. You've got no case against this fellow. It wasn't him that done that shootin'—"

The sheriff said, "No?"

"There's the gun on the floor that made all the racket. It was Turk done the triggerin'—he was tryin' to drop Marlatt. They had it all framed up to jump him, I reckon. When the going got rough Turk grabbed out his shooter."

Bannerman's head wheeled round and his displeased look held a thin, veiled anger as he raked Kane Marlatt with his willful stare. "You got a lot of friends, bucko; but one of these times they won't be around when your smoke blows away. You better not wait for that time to come. You better get on your horse and go while you're lucky."

CHAPTER XI

FLARE-UP

WITH bedroll slopped across shoulder Marlatt was presently threading the yard's deep gloom again.

It was hard, bitter hard, to realize that here again he was doomed to play out a role stamped with turbulence. He had thought, when discovering Towner's duplicity he had fled the man's ranch, to swing his flight this way and give Flack a warning. That done, it had been his plan to find some place where he could hang up his gun and forget the bad past. Only a fool could have hopes of that now. He had a duty here—an obligation. Not to Flack—he could do as he pleased about warning the rancher—but to Oxbow Rand who had asked his aid.

He cut to the left and found the horse trough near the big corral's gate. He washed off the grime of the fight and cleansed the smarting cut on his cheek. A shallow slash, but painful. He made no attempt to improvise a bandage; in this country wounds healed best unwrapped.

He pushed open the door of the foreman's shanty. Closed it—and went coldly still as his hand left the latch. Someone was in this dark place with him. He had lived with danger too long to doubt the lifting hackles at the back of his neck. There was someone here, and—

"Over there to your right," a soft voice whispered. "You'll find a lamp on the table.

"Cori," Marlatt said coldly. "What are you doing here?"

"I've got to talk with you—"

"It can wait till morning."

"I must see you tonight," she said urgently. "Light the lamp—"

"Are you daffy? Go on now; get out of here—"

"Why?"

"Because I say to!" He started forward but she backed off, softly laughing, mocking him.

"I'm not listed under the range boss' orders. Light the lamp—"

"Cori," Marlatt said, "get out of here."

"You aren't very gallant—"

"Gallant be damned! Haven't you the wit," he said quickly, "to think what they'll say if you're seen here?"

"That you're my lover?"

Marlatt cursed the girl's impudence and she laughed—a gay little sound that was brimmed with excitement and—it seemed—more than a little unabashed speculation. She said queerly: "Would you like to be?"

Marlatt stared through the gloom trying to hold back his anger. After all, she was only a kid. He said, "I'm surprised at you, ma'am! A young lady—"

"I'm not so young! I'm old enough to—"

"You're a damn spoiled brat!" he snapped harshly. "Talking like a honkytonk girl from the Plaza! You should be—"

"Ha!" she exclaimed; but he grabbed her and whirled her. A push of his hand sent her stumbling doorward. "Enough!" he growled. "You're going out of here—"

She caught her balance; flung round on him fiercely. "I won't! I shan't go a step till—"

"Cori! Are you inside there?"

Shirly-Bell's voice, gone tight and gone brittle. It came from the door, and the door stood open. They could see her, tall, straight and stiff. She stood in the opening, darkly silent, watching them.

Marlatt cleared his throat. "She just stopped by to—"

"Spare your lies." Shirly-Bell's voice was calm, very calm. It was cold as a knifeblade. "It is no concern of mine why she stopped—nor what she was doing in there with the door shut." Some emotion broke through the disdain in her voice then. "You can explain all that to Ora when—"

"Shirly-Bell!" Amazed indignation pitched Cori's tone. "Surely you wouldn't—"

"Wouldn't I?"

With a last dark look the yellow-haired girl swept around and was swiftly gone in the swirl of the shadows.

"KANE!" Cori gasped. "What are we to *do?*"

She caught at his arm with frightened hands. "What have I—"

"We'll soon enough know," Marlatt answered grimly; and saw her go back from him—saw her back through the doorway. He followed.

She was just a pale blur in the gloom of the peppers; but black and bitter as his own thoughts were, he sensed her feelings and some unguessed impulse of pity, of contrition, drove through the hard shell he showed the world, and he said more reasonably: "I'll go talk with him—"

"Please don't — don't bother! I wouldn't have you budge one step for me—not a step! *Do you hear?*"

The fierceness of her left him staring; and he was still that way, surprised and wordless, when Flack came striding out of the murk. Flack said tightly, "Go to your room, Cori," and then, to Marlatt: "Inside, bucko—and watch your step."

Flack shut the door and put his back against it. "Time we talked turkey."

"Go ahead an' talk."

"I aim to," Flack said. "These are your orders, and I won't repeat them. Stay away from my women."

"I know my place," Marlatt told him

stiffly. "Cori just—"

"Leave it ride. And keep away from her. She's a young, inexperienced, crazy-headed kid and I won't have you fooling with her—I don't want you around her. I've acknowledged your favor by taking you on; but don't get above yourself. You had a smart idea but it won't work—savvy?"

Flack's hooded stare was bland and bright. "No gun thrower," he purred softly, "is goin' to marry into this outfit. When the bells get rung *I'll* pick the man. Understand?"

He nodded mechanically.

"All right," Flack said. "I've a tough crew here—can't use no other. You may have more trouble with them. Do what you have to, but don't take no gun to 'em. They know their work and we can't replace them."

He studied Marlatt a moment longer, green glance slantwise. Then he jerked a nod. "That's all. Good night."

Some facet of the ranchman's parting cut through Marlatt's worriedly puzzled thinking, catching an edge of his sardonic humor. His long lips shaped a wry kind of smile as, stooping, he picked his bedroll off the floor and chucked it over on Cantrell's bunk. So that was all, was it?

All, indeed!

Smart — t h a t ' s what Flack was. Played with his cards hard-snugging his vest. He might have backed Marlatt up in their talk with Bannerman, but he wasn't explaining that talk to Marlatt. Let Marlatt think whatever he'd mind to; what did Flack care what a drifter thought? Flack pulled the strings that moved the sheriff. Sly Flack, who knew that talk was for fools.

A step on the porch yanked Marlatt's head round. He was that way, cocked, when Rand came in.

Rand said at once, "What'd His Nibs come here for?"

"I don't rightly know," Marlatt told him, straightening. "He sort of talked around it."

Rand's glance raked the room and he scowled at it irritably. "He's been actin' damn funny ever since he got back."

"Back?"

"Been away on one of his cattle buyin' trips."

"Oh," Marlatt crossed to the bunk. He stood there a moment looking down at it. Then he jerked Cantrell's belongings off and heaved them doorward. "You can take that junk out an' give it to the crew," he said. He spread his own bedroll and sat down on it wearily. "How are they doin'?"

"I got 'em patched up," Rand said, "but they're feelin' ornery. Better handle 'em gentle—"

"These cattle buyin' trips. Does he take them often?"

"So-so. There's times when he travels right frequent. Mostly, though, he's round pretty reg'lar. Why?"

"Just wonderin'," Marlatt answered indifferently.

"What you think of the sheriff?"

"Ain't seen much of him."

"WELL," Rand allowed with a twisted smile, "you prob'ly will if you stay on here. You'll prob'ly see quite considerable of him. He's got his mind set on marryin' Shirly-Bell."

"That makin' Flack happy?"

"Hard tellin'. Flack ain't one to peddle his notions." Rand paced the room, his look restless and nervous. "You noticed anything since you been around here?"

"Quite a number of things."

Rand nodded; kept on with his pacing. "Any one thing more than another?" He shot the new man a sharp, quick look.

"You mean the crew? Gundogs ain't they?"

"They're plenty tough—an' the rest is just like 'em. Fifteen guys ridin' for this outfit. An' every one of 'em a notch-cuttin' gun thrower."

"Flack says conditions here make him keep a tough crew."

"Shouldn't wonder—but who makes the conditions?" Rand, turning, scowled at him.

Marlatt said, "Bannerman?"

"Bannerman's big, but this country's bigger—he can't watch every place. He does his lawin' pretty much where Flack tells him." Rand paused, added thoughtfully, "Far as I know though, Bannerman's honest. He's a rancher himself an' hates rustlers like poison."

Marlatt recalled what Flack had told the sheriff this evening about rustling. He told Rand about it.

Rand nodded. "There's somethin' queer goin' on all right. It goes deeper than Cantrell though—a lot deeper. I saw that bay; he was with a bunch the boys brought up yesterday. I s'posed Flack had bought him. We got a lot of stock been vented that way."

"Be hard," Marlatt murmured, "to say which was stolen."

"Damn hard. We're runnin' upwards of forty thousan' cattle."

"That many?" Marlatt whistled. "I'd no idea this was such a big outfit."

"You're forgettin'," Rand said. "We're runnin' *two* outfits — Flack's an' Cori's. When Flack took over, Cori's Crescent had better than twenty-eight hundred cows under iron. An' the best range round here. Up till then Ora Flack was a two-bit cow boss."

Marlatt rasped a hand across his jaw. "An' Cori, you say, comes of age next month?"

The short man nodded. He eyed Marlatt darkly. "You beginnin' to get the drift of this business?"

"I'm beginnin' to see a vague light," Marlatt drawled.

Bow Rand stopped his pacing. He shook some Durham into a paper and rolled up a smoke, very slow-like and careful. "Ora," he said, "is pretty well satisfied just the way things stand. Got a sweet layout here. Swings him a lot of weight in this county. He ain't goin' to take it kindly when Cori ups an' asks for an accountin'."

"You think she will?"

Oxbow Rand smiled dryly. "She likes him about the same way I like his crew. An' he knows it—I don't reckon he knows about me; I've kep' my trap shut. But he sure understands what *she* thinks of him."

"I don't see," Marlatt said, "as there's very much he can do about it. As her legal guardian he's bound to hand over her property when she comes of age—if she wants it."

"There's ways," Rand said darkly. "Ora's slick. She could take it to court when the circuit court gits here. But I doubt if they could do more than give her a judgment. Flack would laugh at it. He could drag it out over two or three years—"

"And by that time . . ."

RAND, blackly scowling, nodded. "She wouldn't have a cow left. Or a horse—or so much as a saddle. If I got him figgered right though he'll play it smarter than that. He'll play the marriage game on her if he can't cut it no other way. He'll git her to thinkin' she can marry herself out of it—"

"What have you told her?"

"I ain't told her nothin'. I keep plumb away from her. The first time Ora caught me talkin' with her would be the last day's work I'd do on this spread. I'm the only one of her dad's crew that's left. An' *I* wouldn't be here only I eat out of the same plate with the rest of the snakes."

Rand's face was bitter. "I've kep' my mouth shut an' I've done every-

thing I been told—an' precious little it's brought me. I don't guess Ora'd even trust his own gran'mother. I never git to go no place alone. There's been things goin' on, but you couldn't prove it by me. I been kept on here but I might jest as well 'a' been shipped to Chi; there's times I ain't seen the bulk of this crew for eight-ten weeks' hand-runnin'."

He turned his head and spat out the door. "Flack can talk all he wants about folks that's layin' for him; but you'll never tell *me* this spread's on the level. It may *be*—but I'll not believe it."

CHAPTER XII

"You Cheap, Gun-Packing Murderer!"

"THEN you think Flack's a crook?"

"I don't know," Rand muttered, "whether he is or he ain't. But there's *somebody* crooked around this outfit! I could—Hell! it all boils down to one of two things: Either, like Flack says, there's somebody out to coil his twine for him, *or* somebody's usin' a runnin' iron to pile up Straddle Bug's profits faster. You—"

His voice trailed off.

Like a cat he whirled to face the door; a small shape crouching, heavy pistol at hip. Marlatt, too, had heard and wheeled, with his own hand spread tense and clawed above gun butt. But that quiet, rasped stealth of a shifted weight was not repeated and, though Marlatt prowled the outside shadows while Rand took a careful look through the bunkhouse, the unknown listener got clear away.

Rand came up to Marlatt at the harness shed. The shake of his head was bleakly ominous. "They was all in their bunks. Turk was awake though, an' if ever I saw hate look from a man . . ."

"Reckon it was Flack?" Marlatt asked him guardedly.

The short man shrugged. "But we're sure as hell goin' to hear more about this. Somethin'll break, an' goddam sudden."

Rand shrugged, and thrust his gun back in leather. "There's a fella in town used to be on my payroll—when I was top boss at Crescent. Cheto Bandera. A Mex—but white; an' come anythin' should happen—quick an' mean, d'ye see?—you git in touch with him. Cheto cut his teeth at the same place you did an' he'd give his right arm if he thought 'twould help Cori—"

"What about Miz' Shirly-Bell?" Marlatt asked through Rand's talk; and the short man gave him a tight-faced look. "Miz' Shirly-Bell," he said dryly, "can look out for herself. You tell Cheto I sent you. Cori's dad onct helped him out of a—"

"Hell. You ain't dead yet."

But Rand was not to be kidded out of it. "Never mind. You remember that, fella. If anything goes haywire, git in touch with Bandera." He swung on his heel in the gloom and departed.

Marlatt sat on his bunk in the foreman's shack with the light turned out and a gun in each fist.

Instead of reporting Craft Towner to the Grant County sheriff, he had quit New Mexico to come and warn this Flack of his danger. Towner had been trying to hire Kane Marlatt to gun Flack. Marlatt had said he would think it over, and that same night had cut his stick; and only barely in time at that. Tularosa's snooping had uncovered the knowledge that Marlatt was scouting for the Canadian River Cattle Association and that, more likely than not, he had seen through Towner's ranchman

pose and knew him for the man he was, the notorious Texan, 'Kingfisher'—top-hand cattle thief and killer.

Marlatt felt no shame for having departed in such a lather. To have lingered so much as a few seconds longer would have marked him for a suicide's death. He would have had no chance with that killer outfit. Ben Thompson had been on the place; and Charley Basset and Luke Short, too; and Mysterious Dave Mathers had been looked for at any moment.

He was rather sorry though he had not cut over to warn the sheriff. The Texas Rangers had been hunting Fisher, and would have given plenty to have had Marlatt's knowledge. But Marlatt's chiefest concern at the time had been to put himself beyond Towner's reach; and larruping hellbent through the gusty night it had come to him he had better warn Flack.

He did not know himself why he hadn't warned Flack—why he'd kept putting it off. He'd felt odd about the man from the time he'd first seen him standing on the ranch house porch. He was intrigued by Flack, but he could not like him nor wish him well. Nor could he tell why he did not like him.

HE COULD not pin it down any closer than that. He had noticed the same thing though in Craft Towner; a kind of wildness, maybe. Like the faint smell of rankness that trails a wolf pack.

Thought of Towner brought Marlatt other thoughts till sheer weariness threatened to send him to sleep. Thought of Cori came to him, with her bright child's eyes and boy-slim shape; and recalling the tempting red curve of her lips he thought it too bad she was so spoiled-rotten. What had she wanted of him? A talk, she had said. Marlatt softly snorted. He knew what she needed—a damn good tanning.

Remembrance of Shirly Bell's cool disdain pulled his chin off his chest; and he cursed his luck darkly, finding ready excuses for her thoughts and actions. She had been right to call him gun thrower—for what else was he when you came right down to it? And her suspicions of their business in that unlit shack had been amply justified; if not by fact, by the kind of life she presumed he had led.

The crash of a shot broke the night's deep hush. It jerked Marlatt upright, weird thoughts forgotten. Frozen rigid he crouched there, hearing the echoes smash against the buildings; strike and flatten, fall away to sharp fragments that pulsatingly rolled out over the valley like the final burst of some distant clapping.

It had come from the bunkhouse.

Grim with foreboding Marlatt came off the bunk. Dropping guns to the bed he scooped up his hat and stamped into his boots. His mind raced ahead as he fastened his cartridge belt, deftly tying the whangs that held down his holster. There was going to be trouble—bad trouble; in his bones he felt it, and could not help but remember that piece of advice he had got from the sheriff. "You better get on your horse an' go while you're lucky!"

Too late now. He thrust the extra pistol inside his shirt, felt it snug to his waistband. With his belt gun in hand he went into the yard.

A lamp's yellow glow flowed bright from the bunkhouse. Stiff shapes stood black against the light from the door. They were facing the bunkroom and the drone of their talk broke sharply as the sound of his boots came up with them. He heard his name spoken soft and bitter; and Flack's hunched shoulders came swinging round in a way that was purely wicked.

"That'll be far enough—just stop right there!" And Cori's voice cried

sharply: "Where have you been?" And a queer look reached him from Shirly-Bell's eyes. The other shape belonged to the cook, and the pinched slant of his cheeks was guardedly wooden.

"Yes," echoed Flack. "Just where have you been?"

Marlatt ignored the man's ugly tone. He said, "I been in my shack tryin' to get some sleep—"

"I suppose you can prove that?"

"Sure," Marlatt said sarcastically. "I reckon the pants rats an' seam squirrels will furnish a testimonial for me—"

"If that's supposed to be humor," Flack glared, "you pick a damn poor time for it, friend. A man's been killed and—"

"You got reason to think I killed him?"

"If you want it that way—yes!"

He got a rough-lock on his temper; and when Flack enquired how long he had been there he said with forced calm, "Ever since you left."

"I don't believe it!" Cori cried hotly, and the glint in Flack's eyes gleamed subtly brighter. "You see how it is," he said shrugging. "We've not a thing but your word for it—"

"Are you callin' me a liar?"

BUT Flack just scowled and wheeled about to take a restless stride or two. And Marlatt's following glance observed again the quick, sure, springy reach of that stride. It was incongruous with the man's stooped shoulders and bearded face. With his back turned Flack looked ten years younger.

"Let's see that pistol you're packin', Marlatt."

"What for?"

"You know any reason I shouldn't see it?"

"I've got no reason to think you should. This pistol's comfortable right where it is." Marlatt tightened his grip round the gun's worn stock and the stare he gave Flack was as blank as the rancher's.

"You refuse to let me examine it?"

Marlatt, hesitating, saw the disturbed lift and fall of Shirly-Bell's breathing. "But, Ora!" she cried. "The gun was Ran—"

"Keep out of this, Shirly!"

"So the gun was Rand's, was it?" Marlatt grinned at him. "And what does Rand say—"

"Oh! To think you could stand there and play so in—"

"*Cori!* Go to the house—you, too, Shirly-Bell!" Flack ordered blackly. "Right now! Go—"

Marlatt had no chance to hear any more for Cori was suddenly, straightly, in front of him, her freckled cheeks paled and twisted with fury.

"You cheap, gun-packing murderer!" she cried; and stood, breasts heaving, ineffable scorn and contempt in her eyes.

The look of her shocked him. Alarmed, he was moving forward when her hand lashed up and slapped him, fiercely—again and again, till his cut cheek burned and the sound of her breath came in panting sobs. Going back a step, she flung her full anger at him. "I hate you—hate you—*hate* you!"

The singing silence that followed her words was bleak as the wind off of Yukon ice; and the figures limned in the bunkhouse light were still as things hacked out of marble.

Marlatt stood where her blows had left him, agate glance locked with the glint of her blue one. With the sound of it brittle as glass Cori cried: "I hope to God Nick Bannerman kills you!" and whirled, running, half-stumbling into the clutch of the dark.

CHAPTER XIII

TRIGGERNOMETRY

IT WAS Flack who broke the silence. "Go find that little fool," he said, "and take her into the house, Shirly-Bell. And when you get her there, keep her."

He might as well have spoken in Greek for all Kane Marlatt heard of it. He stood wide-eyed, staring into the dark, with his tough face blank as pounded tin.

When a hand touched his arm with a soft, quick pressure; and Shirley-Bell's voice from the windswept dark said, "Never mind, Kane—*I* believe in you . . ."

Her words broke the spell. Marlatt stirred like a big, shaggy dog coming up out of sleep; and warmed by the trust of this yellow-haired girl felt the blood, dark and red, pounding through him again—felt his muscles swell with the lift of anger.

When the dark had swallowed her Flack said bitterly: "All right. Keep your gun. An' keep it off my men—"

"You know well as I do I didn't gun Rand—"

"He wasn't gunned. He was knifed," Flack said. "An' you're the only one round—"

Brushing past him Marlatt entered the shack. One look was enough. Rand had been knifed all right!

Marlatt saw something then that turned him rigid; and the cold came back to set his spine crawling, to lift the ends of the hair at the back of his neck. The headquarters crew were gone out of this shack. Their bunks were smooth. They had not been slept in. He was, therefore, aside from the cook, the only man round who could have slit Bow Rand's throat—unless Flack had done it.

"Where," Marlatt growled, "is the rest of this crew?"

Flack shrugged. The cook smiled thinly from a corner of his mouth. "They had orders from Cantrell to go out to Camp 2 tonight. Since you gave no instructions to the contrary, I expect they went."

"Very neat," Marlatt breathed; and a lean formidableness gripped his cheeks. "And just when—if you'd be knowin'—did this exodus take place?"

"Right after chuck," the cook said through his teeth.

Marlatt carefully straightened. His glance swapped the cook for Flack's bearded face. The rancher grinned at him coldly. "If this is a frame-up—"

"Harsh words won't butter no parsnips, friend." Flack put his hunched shoulders against the wall. "As I see it the play stacks up something like this. We've all of us noticed one thing from the start: you an' Rand've been too thick not ever to of known each other before. When Cantrell interrupted you by the trees out yonder, you was fixing up some kind of deal with Rand—some kind of scheme to run off more of my cattle. Whatever it was," Flack smiled thinly, "Rand got cold feet; or he made up his mind he didn't want no part of it. He went over to your shack later on an' told you so. More you thought about it after he'd gone, the more scared you got he'd be tippin' me off to it. So, quick's you reckoned we'd all got to sleep, you honed up your knife an' come over here an' skewered him.

"You made two bad slips," Flack went on, smooth as velvet. "One was in picking the place for your killin'—it was smart, in a way; it would prob'ly of worked had the other boys been sleepin' here—but they wasn't, as you found out after you'd killed him. Your second slip was in bunglin' the job—in letting him get to his gun before you'd done his business; that was what caught you.

It gave you no time to remedy your first slip—it gave you no time to make sure he was done for—"

"Done for! With his throat cut like that?"

Flack shrugged; smoothed the fancy vest down over his belly. "The shot spoiled your timing. You heard us coming. You had to cut an' run for it."

UNDER his breath Kane Marlatt cursed softly. He'd never have believed he could so badly misjudge a man. And from the very start he'd been suspicious! But here it was. Not only had he underrated Flack, but he had grossly misjudged the speed with which this stoop-shouldered, pot-bellied rancher could move. The man was chain lightning! Barely five hours had fled since that scene in the office Flack had cleverly staged to lull his suspicions.

It was obvious enough to Marlatt now that Flack was aware of what Rand had said to him—was at least aware of the trend Rand's remarks had taken. And with macabre humor it was the plain intention of this pot-bellied rancher to get himself shut of the both of them, pronto. To play the one off against the other. Very sly.

He saw Flack watching him with cool amusement.

"Where's the knife?"

"Hmmm . . . the point is well taken. Unfortunately," Flack smiled, "you took it away with you. Be a deal of bother to instigate a search for it, and not of much use if we happened to find it. You'd hardly be fool enough to leave it dirty, or to use a blade that could be traced back to you. I think we can do very well without it. The facts," he said blandly, "speak plain for themselves."

"You propose to cash in my chips for me, do you?"

Flack lifted protesting eyebrows. "They may do things that way where you come from, friend; but here around Tucson we try to act civilized. I shall hold you for the sheriff, of course—"

"You're not worried of what I might say to him?"

"Hard tellin' when Nick will show up here. Lot of things could happen between now and then."

"You must think I'm a fool!" Marlatt scowled; and a flick of his wrist set his pistol's barrel directly in line with the third silver button of Flack's fancy vest.

"Well . . . not exactly," the rancher said, blue eyes twinkling. "There's not very much you can do about it, friend. Shooting won't help you. You might drop me; but then there's Lanky behind you. A child couldn't miss with a sawed-off shotgun when its muzzle ain't hardly three feet from its target."

CHAPTER XIV

THE PIMA SHERIFF

FLACK stood loosely watching him, cool as a well chain. He looked to be enjoying this business. He was like a cat with a mouse, Marlatt thought; and rage rushed tumultuously through him. It took every ounce of will-power in him to keep from putting his luck to the test. He could drop Flack certainly; he might even manage to down Lanky. . . .

Cool reason came to crush the impulse; reason and remembrance. The tempestuous urge of the roaring blood passed, and he saw with a sudden clarity how this slick-talking Flack might have tricked him again. The cook hadn't even a gun belt on—let alone a shotgun ready to hand. Flack had hoped with his talk to swing Marlatt's back around.

"Try again," Marlatt drawled, and grinned at Flack coldly. It was premature; for at that split second the lanky cook sprang. The lunge of his drive carried Marlatt off balance, drove him lurching floorward with the cook on his shoulders. His downthrust hands crumpled under the weight and his chest came against the floor flatly. The pistol went skittering out of his fist and from the tail of an eye he saw Flack coming; saw Flack's black beard and the gleam of his teeth—saw the wicked glint of a knife in Flack's hand.

Marlatt rolled, straining all his sinews against the cook's clutch. The cook's grip broke when he struck Flack's boots, and the battering force of his bony shoulders bowled the legs like straws from under Flack. The ranchman came down hard and grunted. He came down on the cook. Air belched from Lanky in one great *whish*. Teeth bared and cursing, Flack came afoot—and found Marlatt eying him above a cocked pistol.

"I don't suppose," Marlatt drawled, "that would be the knife, would it?"

For a second Flack glowered. Then a parched grin twisted the beard round his lips and he thrust the blade away in his boot. He said, "Don't push your luck too far," and started for the door.

Marlatt stretched an arm across his path. "You're not done with this yet. You've started something, Flack, that I'll finish—"

"You'll wind up on a shutter!"

"Mebbe I will—but there'll be other shutters in the same procession. Remember that, Flack, when you see Nick Bannerman. You've stacked the cards well but there's one or two you didn't have hold of—better think of Craft Towner before you start yappin'."

He scooped up Rand's gun, got his own from the corner and went out of the bunkhouse — went, leaving Flack with his blue eyes blank.

HE moved straight to the corral and roped out his horse, the blaze-faced roan he had bought from Oliphant yesterday morning.

He was tightening the cinches when Cori came over. Somehow he knew it was Cori coming without even looking at her.

"Where are you going?" she demanded.

He didn't turn nor bother answering her.

He stood coiling his rope. He put the rope on his saddle.

Cori said scathingly: "Quitter!"

When it seemed he would prove impervious she cried hotly: "After all them brave words! Lettin' Flack run you out! I'd be *ashamed*—"

"All right. Nobody'll stop you."

He heard the catch of her breath; swung round and faced her. This cold dawn light was not kind to her. But he was in no mood to pity her. And the scorn and anger he saw blazing in her eyes—

"I came out here," she said, "to ask your pardon. I've been thinking, and it's plain enough Rand's murder is a piece with the other things round here. I was wrong to think you had killed him—but I'll not ask your pardon!" she blazed.

All her hurt, all her scorn came tumbling out then in words that were sharp as the lash of a whip. "You haven't that much nerve! You haven't the spunk of a jackrabbit! Even a *coyote*—"

"Good night," Marlatt said, and reached for his saddle.

But he was not to be gone so swiftly as that.

He was swinging up on the horse when a bull voice shouted: "Hold on there, you! I want to see you, bucko!"

It was big Nick Bannerman, the Pima sheriff.

CHAPTER XV

SLY ORA CHUCKLES

THIS looked like being it, Marlatt thought; and slewed a glance around for Flack. But Flack and the cook had not come in sight. The sheriff's long legs were nearing him rapidly.

"Me?" Marlatt said.

"I hope I got more manners than to talk at a lady that way." Bannerman, scowling, came to a stop with his left hand clamped to Kane Marlatt's bridle. "It may interest you to know I've got your gun-packin' pard safely locked in jail—"

"You must be mistaken, Sheriff. I've got no pard—"

"Your friend then. That hard lot calling himself Tularosa—"

"He's no friend of mine."

There was a leer on Bannerman's beefy face. "That's one point you're both agreed on, seems like. He says you engineered that stealin' and—"

"You're hopin' like hell to prove it, ain't you?"

"I'm *goin'* to prove it." Nick Bannerman grinned at him. "You watch my smoke!"

"By that time," said Marlatt, "I'd have more beard than Flack's got. Sorry, Sheriff, but the chores of this ranch—"

"Ora can worry along with the ranch. You're goin' to jail, bucko. *Right damn now!*" With one swift sweep of a blurred right hand the sheriff had a six-shooter cocked and leveled.

Marlatt looked down his nose at it. "You'll get killed someday pullin' that stunt, Sheriff. Some fool will think you're in earnest, likely—"

A surge of red rimmed the sheriff's collar. "Go on," he said; "make the most of it, bucko. When you find yourself underneath a limb—"

"The law requires evidence—"

"I'll furnish all the evidence *any*one wants—"

"I'm sure of it." Marlatt held hard to his temper. "But in a case of this kind, the law—"

"The laws weren't framed to help the likes of *you!* Unbuckle that gun belt!"

Marlatt lounged in the saddle with his lean cheeks taut, with his eyes like steel. He said very softly, "I guess not, Bannerman;" and like a flash his boot came up and stopped, hard and short, at the sheriff's chin. Bannerman's head went back like a rock had struck him. His burly shoulders swayed and he staggered with his eyes rolled back; and suddenly crumpled.

Two spurts of flame bit the black rectangle of the bunkhouse door. Lead ricocheted from Marlatt's cantle. Hard on its heels came the crack of a rifle—twice—three times; and Marlatt fled with the creased horse under him going like a rocket.

Nick Bannerman, hard scowling after that sped shape, swore bitterly. When convinced the man really meant to run for it, the sheriff too had flung up his gun and joined its bark with the blasts from the bunkhouse; but tumultuous passions unsteadied his aim. He had no better luck than the others were having. Choking with rage he ran back to his horse and with shaking hands got the gear stripped off it. Lugging these things he was passing the bunkhouse when Flack and the scowling cook came out. The cook had a rifle and his lips were twitching.

"I'm borrowin' a horse," Bannerman growled at the rancher.

FLACK nodded. "Take the palomino."

"Hell with your palomino!" The grunted words came over Nick's shoulder. "How about that Morgan?

I want somethin' with bottom—"

"Go ahead," Flack said; and followed him over. He stood by the gate watching Bannerman work. The cook went along to his pots and pans and was shortly throwing a smoke up his chimney. "Better stop a bit and have some grub, Nick."

"An' let that polecat get clear away?"

"I've an idea he'll keep. Why don't you play this smart, Nick?"

The sheriff, cinching up, gave him one hard look. He slipped on the bridle. "Smart, eh? As how?"

Pungently, concisely, the whiskered rancher outlined a version of Bow Rand's killing; and the sheriff's look got blacker and blacker. Flack said smoothly, "Now look. I believe I know why he rubbed out Rand . . ."

"Yeah?" Bannerman was plainly in a sweat to be gone.

"Yes," Flack said, and thoughtfully nodded. "I'm pretty near sure of it. I been thinking. This fellow and Rand have met before. They got thicker'n fiddlers about as soon as Rand saw him —got off by themselves where the rest couldn't hear them. They did a heap of talking—Marlatt, mostly; and it struck me first off he was cookin' up a deal to run off more of my cattle, or my horses mebbe.

"Now wait," he said as the sheriff would have spoken. "This ain't no time for a bull in the china shop. Any brash fool can go off half-cocked; but the smart guy scouts where his boots will take him. When he jumps he knows where his boots will come down. This is a right good time to use your head, not your elbow—"

"Go ahead an' use it then," Bannerman growled. "I'm goin' to put *my* trust in a pair of hot spurs!" He said it wickedly and swung to his saddle; but Flack's quick hand caught the horse by the cheek strap.

"Just a minute!" Flack said. "He ain't skippin' the country. You better hear me out an' see what you're going up against. That fellow's no ordinary grubline drifter—"

"He's a goddam gun thrower!" Bannerman cursed.

"He's a lot more than that," Ora Flack said quietly. "You're not any slouch with a gun yourself—but if this guy's who I think he is, you'd have no more chance than a flea in hell's furnace.

"I've had one of the boys out looking around. He rode in from the east—from the southeast in fact. From off towards Texas—"

"Hell! I knew that already! 'Cordin' to this Tularosa, he come from over round—"

"New Mexico. Yes," Flack said blandly. "But before that I think you'll find he was getting his mail some place in Texas. I've lived in the Lone Star state myself, and this hombre—"

"Thought you knew all about him," said Bannerman acridly. "Didn't I hear you say important people had vouched for this Marlatt—"

"For Marlatt, yes. But you brought up an interesting point when I was telling you that. You asked how I knew this fellow was Marlatt. That's been the one weak spot in the entire business; and it got me thinking."

Flack's nod was assurance. "I've about decided the guy *isn't* Marlatt."

"Then who in hell *is* he?"

"THAT'S what I'm getting at. He's a Texan, certainly. So was Rand. Rand came, so he's said, from Uvalde County. Rand's way of talking—his inflection—and this fellow's, have a lot in common when you come to think of it. I've told you I believe Rand recognized him right away as someone he had known before. I am still of that opinion. I think it was *because* Rand recognized him that this—"

"All very well," Bannerman muttered impatiently. "But all this slick theorizin' ain't helpin' me get him locked up in no cell! Meantime he's larrupin'—"

"He won't larrup far. He came a long way to get here and, if he's the man I think he is—"

"For Christ sake," Bannerman rasped out savagely, "if you know—"

Flack smiled. "I think you'll find him described on reward bills as J. K. Fisher."

"Great God in heaven!" the sheriff cried. *"Kingfisher!"*

CHAPTER XVI

What Manner of Rascal—

THAT had been a near thing, Marlatt mused as he larruped townward; and wondered for the twentieth time why it was this white-haired sheriff should feel so hot about him. He could think of nothing he had done that would adequately account for it. He had known, of course, that Bannerman, though giving in to it, had been a long ways from satisfied with Ora Flack's advocacy—with that grand line of bull Flack had thrown last evening on behalf of Marlatt. He'd given in to it because there'd been little else he *could* do; but it had been plain enough he meant to go on probing, meant to pin the deadwood on him if he could. And the hell of it was, Marlatt grudgingly admitted, big Nick just *might* get away with it!

One thing was certain. The sooner he got in touch with this Cheto Bandera—

Right there Marlatt's thinking hit a snag again. For after all, what could Bandera tell him that Bow Rand, on the spot, had not already covered? The Mex hadn't even been working for Ora.

But just the same Marlatt guessed he'd better see the man. Rand had seemed to set considerable store by him.

So engrossed was Marlatt in his thoughts that he reached and entered the adobe-walled town without hardly being cognizant of it. To be sure, he was not unaware he was riding through town, and he smelled the town smells—heard the noise of it; he even hazily noticed the big-wheeled wagons, the bearded teamsters, the frock-coated gentry, the women with their baskets, the spur-clanking cowpokes, the urchins and dogs that were everywhere. What he failed to take heed of was the risk he was running in thus openly riding about Tucson. A good many people had witnessed his run-in with Tularosa, and some of those folks would remember him.

He was passing the bank when it happened.

Engrossed in his daydreams he did not observe the black-hatted man abruptly stopped in its entrance, hard staring and still—nor the bloated look of his swivel-jawed face, or the poisonous flush spreading over it.

Marlatt was just past the angle of the bank's open door when the bullet jerked at his neckerchief, and the sharp, flat crack of a pistol loosed its clattering echoes in the crowded street.

Marlatt's shape whipped round in the saddle and the glint of his eyes was like sunburnt metal. His hard look raked the scared white faces that were frantically ducking for the nearest cover.

A long-haired urchin grabbed his stirrup and pointed. "Down there, Mister! There he goes—*see* 'im? The purple shirted feller in the Mex sombrero!"

But all Marlatt caught was a fleeting

glimpse of one spurred boot. That and the description were enough, however, to slam his own spurs into the roan; and they went racketing down the alleyway after him. There was only one man who limped that way, wore a purple shirt and a black sombrero. Curly Lahr, the Towner gun thrower who had helped Tularosa rob the stage office yesterday!

But Lahr's luck was holding. He had got away yesterday and, inside of five minutes, he repeated the performance. He was a regular will-o'-the-wisp, Marlatt thought as, tight-lipped and furious, he rounded the corner and found the back street empty—there was not even a naked muchacho or a snoring paisano in the filth and dust of that fly-infested quarter.

Piling out of the saddle Marlatt dropped his reins and dived into the nearest. There were three shut doors opening off the dim corridor. Its far end terminated in an unkempt patio, hot, completely enclosed and completely deserted. Retracing his steps Marlatt tried the doors, pounding on them vigorously with the barrel of his pistol.

BUT the treatment evoked no answer. The doors were barred and they stayed that way.

With a snort of disgust Marlatt went back to his horse. He went back, that is, to where he had left it. But the blaze-faced roan was no longer there. It had gone as completely as Lahr had gone. There were no tracks, even, to prove it had been there. Marlatt glared; said a few angry things swiftly under his breath.

He was still there, muttering, when a fat and wrinkled old woman, very obviously Spanish, came waddling into the passageway toward him.

Marlatt took off his hat. "You speak English, senora?"

"Americano? Si! Si, senor!"

"You can tell me, perhaps, how to find one who is named Cheto Bandera?"

"Love of God—*hush!*" gasped the old lady nervously; and cast frightened eyes at the halls' dark rectangles. "The smallest pitcher can carry water. What good is a candle without a wick?"

Marlatt stared, took a look toward the hallways and regarded her dubiously. "Bander—" he started; and stopped, mouth open. The old lady had turned and, snatching her petticoats, was aimed for the street like the devil was after her.

He let her go; shook his head and glared round more puzzled than ever. There was no one in sight. She was plainly daft.

He looked round again and finally shrugged. Clapping on his hat he headed streetward himself. Lahr had got the best of him all right, but next time should see a different story told. At that, he'd been lucky; the Towner gun thrower might well have killed him with that murderous shot he had fired from the bank steps.

He fully expected to find a crowd round the alley. But there was none. Evidently daylight attempts at assassination were of all too common occurrence to rate more than passing interest in the walled town of Tucson.

Yet the town was doing plenty of business. As he'd entered the street a shouting, whooping group of riders had come tearing around the bank corner, hilariously scattering dust and pedestrians without regard for life or property. There was plenty of cursing and a lot of black scowls but no man lifted a hand in protest.

But the afternoon was wearing on. Marlatt had no horse and he'd not found Bandera; and hunger was beginning to make itself manifest. He found a hash house and went in and ate,

afterwards taking a final turn round the plaza and heading for Oliphant's. He meant to find Bandera before he left, but it would be no good asking any of this crowd—

"Hail Mary! A little charity, caballero! In the name of Jesus, and God will repay you."

Marlatt's glance found the man on the steps of the bank. A deplorable beast with an unwashed face and a pair of cocked eyes that leered at him knowingly. A leathern dice cup in spatulate fingers was waggled wheedlingly. "Charity, senor! A trifle for the maimed, and the Mother of God will surely repay you."

WITH a shrug Marlatt dug a coin from his purse and the man caught it deftly, tried it with his teeth and pocketed it, grinning. "The gentleman is a friend to the poor. God preserve you."

A sudden thought came to Marlatt and turned him back to regard the man with a narrow inquiry. This fellow's true age was a matter of hazard but he was Mexican, obviously. An odorous wretch in a filthy dragoon jacket with nothing under it but a hairy chest and a twist of frayed rope precariously supporting ragged pantalones whose original color must have long been in debt. A true scion, Marlatt thought, of the breed *pelado;* and the impossible angle at which a scaly left leg was doubled under him lent the crowning touch to a repulsive sight.

"A-a-ai-hé!" he exclaimed, catching Marlatt eying him. "Praise God! Your Excellency wishes to enlarge his gift?"

"Depends," Marlatt said. "I reckon you'd be knowin' most of your countrymen around here, wouldn't you?"

The beggar's cocked eyes dimmed a bit. "What the head knows, only the mouth can tell, senor."

"Waggle yours then and be assured of my further patronage."

"Ai—not so fast!"

"While the grass is growing the horse may die," Marlatt said impatiently; and stared down the street as though casting about for a man more informed.

The man was eying him craftily. "What would your Excellency of poor Tio Felix?"

Marlatt said, "All I want is some information." He clinked a couple of coins in his hand. "An address. The whereabouts—"

"Ai! Of a certain lady—"

"Of a man," Marlatt said, cutting short his leer. "A vaquero who used to ride for El Rancho Crescent. Cheto Bandera."

The change in the beggar's look was startling. "Thunder and lightning! That one!" he cried. "That *picaro!*" Muttering under his breath Tio Felix crossed himself; and his regard of Marlatt held little favor. "His honour is a reckless man who throws such a name about the streets. If a fool held his tongue he would pass for a wise man—"

"Look!" Marlatt growled. "Do you want this money or don't you?"

"Your Excellency asks a question."

"All right," Marlatt said, thrusting the coins in his pocket. "Someone else will tell me—"

"How true!" Tio Felix sighed. "He who would hide must hoodwink the devil. Does your Excellency know what manner of rascal he seeks?"

"If a hungry man has only two beans does he throw them away because one is dirty?"

Tio Felix grinned. "After all," he shrugged, "though the bell says no mass it may call up the righteous." A shrewd gleam brightened his cocked regard. "Did your Excellency say two golden eagles?"

Marlatt hesitated. "All right," he said. "Two golden eagles. Where can I find him?"

"Not so fast. Not even God's angels could tell you that. But for two golden eagles I will myself show you tonight where this picaro sometimes quenches his thirst."

Though Marlatt argued and threatened to find out elsewhere Tio Felix could not be induced to say better than that; and in the end he paid the man and the beggar named the place for their meeting.

"But how'll *you* get there?" Marlatt's puzzled glance keened the beggar's bent leg. "And how'll I be knowin' you will even try?"

"Who cannot run can crawl. I am a man of honour. Be there yourself, senor, and you will find me waiting. For two more eagles I will point out the man."

Tio Felix grinned as Marlatt vanished in the crowd.

CHAPTER XVII

In the Barrio Libre

THE place Tio Felix had named for their rendezvous was a two-by-four dive off Meyer Street, in the *barrio libre*, not far from the southernmost edge of town. Clear across its cracked front with a bold red brush some imaginative soul long gone to his M a k e r had pretentiously painted: REGULAR PALOMA CANTINA. Right away Marlatt agreed with the first part—if it was no other thing the Paloma was 'regular'. Illumined with smoky kerosene lanterns, crowded and raucous as Bedlam, it was typical of its kind and reeked to heaven with cheap perfume, with tobacco smoke, sweat and garlic and a host of other smells not so quick tagged; everything stank, including the patrons.

A girl came up to him, flouncing, lips smiling. She was plumply handsome, with flashing black eyes and a mop of black hair. She leaned toward him, hands on hips but Marlatt brushed past her and wormed his way through the jostling crowd to where Tio Felix, true to his word, sat drumming a mug on the edge of his table. He looked enjoyed and comfortable with his cocked eyes dancing and his twisted leg on a greasy cushion that was stuffed with straw.

Marlatt would have sworn the beggar had not seen him coming; yet he must have. Dragging his interest from the flying bare legs of a Zincali dancer, he ducked shaggy head and shoved out a stool with the heel of his hand. "Your Excellency honours our poor place. Be of the goodness to sit, senor," he bade, scowling round for a waiter. "A mug of pulque for the don caballero—Here, wait!" he called. "Make it two"; and he grinned up at Marlatt. "It takes a wet whistle to make a sweet tune."

Marlatt dragged up the stool and rested his elbow on the table.

"Is he here yet?"

"Presently. Presently, senor." Tio Felix was not to be rushed. He waved an airy hand.

Marlatt kept his impatience from showing on his face; but it was not easy. Bannerman must have learned by now that he was somewhere in the town and, keeping in mind the stubborn streak of bull tenacity which appeared to govern the man in all his actions, it required no strain of the imagination to picture the sheriff calmly turning the town on its ear to find him; and it might not be so calmly at that, Marlatt thought, remembering their parting.

So he forced himself to sit here dawdling while the sheriff's search must be creeping closer; to sit here knowing that he had no horse—that if a showdown came he would have to steal one. Or face Nick Bannerman across the smoke of pistols. He could not sur-

render; for once behind bars Flack would pin Rand's murder on him sure as sunset.

"It was a brave thing—that. Does your Excellency not think so?"

"Eh?" Marlatt said.

The beggar laughed. "Who gathers wool must pay for the shearing."

"Afraid I didn't hear you. I was watching the dancers."

Tio Felix shrugged. "I said only the Son of God himself could afford to be so reckless. Es verdad—no?"

"I still don't know what you're talkin' about."

"About that picaro, Tularosa—who else? Has your honour not heard he is loose again? Of a certainty! With my own poor eyes I have seen him walking the streets like an honest man. Si! Scarce twenty minutes fled."

Marlatt eyed him, startled. "Tularosa? The man who stuck up the stage office yesterday?"

"Si. El hombre malo. Ten riders have surround the great brick courthouse—it is all over town. With their rifles against his chest they forced the jailer to loose this fellow. He was in the first floor cell block; and they took him out and now he prowls through the town like a hungry lobo—"

"Who were these riders?"

"IT IS not known, Excellency. They were masked—but very bold, no?" Tio Felix shook his head and made clucking sounds in the roof of his mouth.

"What has the sheriff—"

"Senor White Head?" The beggar grinned and his cocked eyes leered. "He was hunt for you. I think he will come here presently—"

He got no further. A commotion jammed the street door with figures. A cry went up. A jerked out scream went shrill and curdled—broke in the middle like a board snapped in two. There was an ominous roar; quick, angry curses. The crowd round the doorway swayed and staggered. The smoky light skittered red from knife-blades.

"Cuidado, hermanos! Los aguacil—"

On the heels of the shout a six-gun thumped swift crashes of sound that smashed like waves across the clamor; and one by one, with beautiful precision, the lanterns winked out in bursts of glass that mingled gun-stench with the reek of hot coal-oil.

Marlatt's arm was caught in a grip of steel. With his free left hand Marlatt jerked a pistol and was bringing it round, tight-lipped and savage, when the beggar's breath fanned across his cheek. "Mercy of God—" Tio Felix hissed; "come quick—come quick! This way, senor!" and his fiercening grip tugged Marlatt frantically.

Straight back through the howling dark he led like his eyes were a cat's; and Marlatt, stumbling, oft-swearing, followed perforce, for the beggar's clutch clung tight to his arm as though, knowing a good thing, he was loathe to lose it.

What a rat's hole they followed! Through a hidden door in the Dove's back side, through the bricked-up walls of a musty tunnel that was dank underfoot and slippery with slime, through another thieves' roost and some kind of a warehouse that was jammed to the roof with sack-covered bales of what Marlatt guessed must be contraband; and ever the beggar's muttered tones gave warning—"A turn, senor! The roof drops, senor! Of the head now be careful! Twist the foot to the left! Watch out for the barrels! God in heaven—have a care! Now quick—this way!"

A crazy, wild and nightmare journey that must carry them ever farther and farther from the man Oxbow Rand had bidden him contact.

"Duck the head, senor—quick! For-

ward now."

They were out in the open under God's bright stars, in a black, murky region of tumbledown houses whose paintless slants leaned so far toward the alley their flimsy balconies nearly rubbed railings.

With a quick, sure step Tio Felix led, and the pant of his breath—the soft thud of their footsteps, were the only sounds in the black lane they traveled save, far to the rear, where a muted hubbub advised the Dove's wings were still flapping.

"A NEAR thing, that!" Tio Felix muttered, striking left through the gloom. "It was the white-headed one—El Senor Sheriff. But we have left him scratching—thanks to the intervention of God's blessed Mother. He can scratch till cock's crow and never guess where your honour's gone. Los ladrones will hold him, never fear, amigo. Many times he has hunt for Bandera before—"

"For Bandera!" Marlatt echoed. "You think he was after Bandera?"

"But certainly! He would never think to find your honour at the Dove—"

"But what would he want with Bandera?"

"Carajo! What, indeed!" Felix muttered, and made another quick turn in the night.

A pitch black cul-de-sac opened before them. In the faint star haze Marlatt saw no outlet, but the beggar led on; and presently Marlatt felt the man's hand on his shoulder again. They passed through a door so narrow Marlatt's shoulders scraped. There was no squeak of hinges so they must have been oiled or kept well greased, Marlatt guessed; and saw to the right a great oblong of lesser darkness and the vague outline of a corral beyond. There was straw underfoot and the place smelled of cattle.

"We ascend to the roof," Tio Felix murmured, and placed Marlatt's hand on the grip of a ladder.

"Not so fast," Marlatt said. He shoved his pistol's barrel hard against the man's stomach. "I probably owe you some thanks for gettin' me out of that; but if it wasn't for you I wouldn't of been there, so that makes us even."

"To be sure, senor; but—"

"I'm not quite a fool," Marlatt told him softly. "What you do, or what you're up to, is no business of mine. But this evenin' you was a crippled beggar; it's been all I could do tonight keepin' up with you. I think our trails had better part right here."

Against the lesser darkness of the yonder oblong Marlatt saw the man's shoulders lift in a shrug. "As you please, of course," Tio Felix said, "but if your honour has business with this Cheto Ban—"

He broke off, head canted. Marlatt, too, had stiffened. Soft footsteps had paused in the dust of the alley; stealthy steps that had stopped by the door.

There was an instant of quiet. Then the hush was broken by a low, guarded call. "Cheto!" It was a girl's voice—urgent. "Cheto . . . are you there?"

The men's eyes locked in the gloom of the stable.

It was Cori Malone who had called from the alley.

Tio Felix laughed softly. "To be sure, senorita. We are both here," he chuckled.

Kane Marlatt stood like a rock in his tracks with the snout of his pistol still against the man's belly. It was not the reaction Tio Felix had looked for. Did the man not understand it was *he*, Tio Felix, who was Cheto Bandera?

Tio Felix, peering closer, felt his scalp suddenly prickle. With a hand streaking hipward he whirled like a cat.

"Freeze, you lobos!"

The words came from the stableyard, three short steps distant. Bandera's shape went still as death.

"Now, damn your eyes, I've got you —*both* of you! Just blink by God, an' I'll let you have it!"

It was Bannerman. Blackly crouched between them and the pole corral, with a gun in each hand and his tin badge glinting.

CHAPTER XVIII

"Blood of God—Jump!"

CORI'S low gasp was startled —frantic.

Nick Bannerman's voice said, "Come inside, Cori, and find me a lantern."

The girl had not moved. Bannerman called again, harshly.

Balancing odds, Marlatt saw the issue. The whole play revolved on one tiny factor: *could the sheriff see them?* If he *could*, to move would bring death hell-tearing. But *could* he?

The ladder beside them was but a short step removed from the broad rectangle giving onto the yard. The sheriff's black shape was two strides beyond, in the lesser gloom of the yard itself. Point-blank range—and the man showed clearly.

Desire pulled Marlatt's lip corners down; thrust a gun-barrel shine to the slits of his eyes.

Cold sweat beaded his forehead. If, in the murk of this stable, they were obscured from Bannerman, the guns the sheriff was holding were little better than Marlatt's own, whose muzzle impotently stared at the floor. Surely if the sheriff could see them plain as he would have them think, wouldn't he have bidden Marlatt drop the gun?

Or was he playing this crafty, hoping Marlatt would think just that and, so thinking, be lured into making a try with the gun?

Marlatt's lip corners tightened. Resist of an officer in pursuit of his duty would be all the alibi Bannerman needed.

He peered through the gloom at the man's crouched placement and precisely then Nick Bannerman spoke. It was as though he had read Kane Marlatt's mind. "I've got this place surrounded, bucko. Better chuck that gun in a corner before it gets you laid out on a shutter."

Marlatt hesitated; and the chance was gone. Cori, coming in from the alley, said: "Nick; don't do something you'll be sorry for."

Bannerman's laugh was a harsh-rasped thing. "Never mind gassin', girl. Get the lantern. The quicker we have a light in here the safer it'll be for these friends of yours—"

A match scratched through the sheriff's words and Cori sprang into sharp silhouette with the end of it brushing a lantern's wick. The wick flared. Cori squeaked the lantern shut and hung it from a nail near the door. It was then Nick Bannerman's curse came slamming through the thump of his boots on the hard-packed floor.

"Where the bloody hell is that greaser?" He glared at Marlatt as though he would strike him with one of the pistols tight gripped in his hands. His wheeling glance struck at Cori bitterly. "*You* called to him—I heard him answer! Where is he?"

The girl's white cheeks showed nothing but wonder. "Perhaps—" began Marlatt; but the beggar's whine cut through his words. "For dos pesos, senor—wait! make it four; what is lost and recovered becomes twice valuable! For four pesos then," Tio Felix leered from his crouch on the floor, "I will tell your honour where Bandera went—"

"Where?"

"It takes dinero to buy good pulque—"

Bannerman leveled a pistol at Marlatt's middle. "Throw that gun out the door!"

There was nothing else for it. Marlatt did as bidden.

With pale eyes flashing the sheriff wheeled burly shoulders and made for the beggar.

IN SWIFT alarm Tio Felix cried: "He went out the alley as the girl came in!"

"Then my men will get him." The sheriff lost interest; turned hard eyes on Marlatt. "I told you, bucko, that you'd better clear out. It's goin' to be a real pleasure to see your neck stretched. You should of cut your stick—"

"Never mind me. What do you want with Bandera?"

Nick Bannerman thrust his lefthand pistol into the waistband of his corduroy trousers. Twirling the other one by its trigger guard he said, vastly pleased with himself, "Well, bucko, I don't mind telling you. It'll be no news to you Flack's been losin' cattle; none of this'll be news to *you*—but it's sure as hell goin' to startle Ora. Bandera, as you damn well know, has been helpin' you run off Straddle Bug stock. Bandera's been bossin' your rustlers for you. Rand's been tippin' you off to when an' where you birds can best grab 'em—"

Marlatt laughed contemptuously. "You expect to make that stick?"

"It'll stick all right—"

"I thought you was figurin' to arrest me for Bow Rand's murder."

"Nope." Nick smiled at him smugly; turned so his smile could include the girl. "Some star packers might undertake to do that—but not me. When I go off I hit what I aim at. Remember that, bucko, case you think of tryin' somethin'. Nope; I ain't quite green enough to fall for that. I've got you dead to rights, *Mister John Kingfisher!*"

There was danger here and Kane Marlatt recognized it. If it was Bannerman's intention to pin that name on him, his guilt or innocence would make little difference. The crowd would take him out of Bannerman's hands. Just the same, he grinned; he could not help it. The satisfaction of the man touched his sense of humor.

"Kingfisher wears a mustache, Bannerman—"

"There's plenty of razors round this country."

"John Kingfisher is a fancy dude. He—"

"Clothes don't mean anything. Any guy can change 'em—"

"You'll never make it stick—"

"I won't have to." Bannerman chuckled. "It'll be up to *you* to prove you ain't. I won't have to turn a hand, even. You've switched the brand of your last steer, bucko. Skirts is what traps most of you polecats—"

"Skirts?"

The sheriff looked at Cori and laughed. "I been weaned," he said, "a long while back. Cori Malone ain't the first bit of calico that's tried her hand at this owlhoot business—"

"Have you gone off your head completely?"

"There ain't nothin' wrong with *my* head, bucko. It's—"

He broke off, startled.

That was when Tio Felix became Bandera again.

An oath jarred out of the sheriff's mouth. The gun fell out of his hand with a clatter as Bandera's whistling blade skewered his wrist to a roof post. He stood there, rooted, with a vast surprise looking out of his stare as the beggar, shaking the twist from his leg, came straight-eyed erect with his white

teeth flashing.

Nick Bannerman stared like a pole-axed steer. Rage turned black his twisted cheeks. With a strangled snarl he snatched for the knife that held him anchored.

He was like that, wheeling, with his free hand reaching, when a yell split the night and gun sound hammered the walls like sledges.

MARLATT spun in his tracks. One outsweeping arm caught Cori and flung her, stumbling, toward the ladder. "Up top—quick!" He dragged Rand's gun from his waistband and drove three shots through the stable doorway at the leaping figures diving into the yard. Bandera's swift reach snaked the second pistol from the sheriff's shell belt. "Up top! Up top!" Marlatt snarled at him hoarsely; saw the lawman's swung pistol maliciously stopped against the sheriff's head—saw the Mexican wrench loose his knife as Bannerman crumpled. Then the alley door was ripped from its hinges and he emptied Rand's gun at the shapes coming through it, shattered the lantern and sprang for the ladder, crowding Bandera's bare feet up it frantically.

The stable was suddenly a screaming black bedlam stabbed and lanced with flashes of gunflame, bursting with shouts and rocked and shaken by the hammering concussions of exploding cartridges. It was, Marlatt knew, no place for a woman; and he caught the Mexican's shoulder roughly. "Ain't this damn rat hole got another outlet?"

Bandera, breathing heavily, in the darkness nodded. "Come—duck low," he muttered, and led them through a trap onto the roof which was parapeted and, like most Spanish roofs, had hardly more than an inch or two's slope, just sufficient to carry the infrequent rains off. A short, running jump took them onto the next roof; another quick jump took them one roof farther.

Starlight flashed from Bandera's teeth. "Your honor understands what men are these—"

"They're Ora Flack's!" cried Cori hotly.

"Sabe dios." The Mexican shrugged with Latin eloquence. "The sheriff will call them ours—ladrones, bandidos. Kingfisher's men—I can hear him swear it; come to save your honor—"

"They *are* Kingfisher's men," Marlatt's tone was curt. "It was Tularosa who yelled back there; and I know Lahr's voice too well to m—"

"There they come!" gasped Cori; and Bandera growled: "Over the wall with you—quick, senorita! God's angels will watch for you—over now! Muy pronto!"

They ran to the parapet at the roof's far side and Cori swung bare legs across it, agile as a boy while Marlatt crammed fresh shells in his gun. Bandera braced himself and, catching the girl's clasped hands in his strong right one, let her down as far as he could. "Drop!" he bade her; and as her hands left his, Marlatt's gun roared twice.

A sharp cry came from off yonder; shrill it sheared through the crash of gunfire. Hoarse shouts rose too, and malignant curses. Lead thumped and squealed and whistled about them, smashing bits from the wall just under them. Hoarse words welled out of Bandera's throat. "Blood of God, amigo—*jump!*" he cried.

CHAPTER XVIX

TRAPPED

BUT Marlatt was not quite ready to jump. There was something here he meant to do first. With chin-strapped hat on the back of his

shoulders he slid across the roof's low wall and, bracing his elbows, hung from its top on tense-clamped fingers. The strain was monstrous, but he kept his hold.

Bandera's urgent voice cried: "Drop! Quick, senor—let go!"

But Marlatt gave the man no heed. "Take care of Cori!" he muttered curtly, and kept his glance on the goblin shapes that, shouting blasphemies, were coming hellbent across the roof tops. It was like an avalanche, that bobbing, writhing wave of shapes that came roaring toward him through the swirling gloom. But only one shape was Marlatt watching. With black lids squeezed narrow he watched that one with malicious interest—the gangling shape of the man snarling orders.

And then they were just short yards away, sloshing across the yonder parapet. With all his weight on one shaking arm, Marlatt loosed a hand and got Rand's pistol; thrust its barrel across the wall.

And then he did a crazy thing. Some soft streak in him—or pride, perhaps—made him give the man warning.

"Sometimes," he called, "a man's wild ways catch him up, Tularosa!"

The words lost him his chance. Just as his finger squeezed the trigger the surface beneath his grip gave way—burst and crumbled under his fingers and dropped him crashing in a cloud of dust.

He struck on his boot heels and went over backwards.

Unhurt save in pride, and cursing bitterly, he scrambled up and stopped, shocked sober. The girl and Bandera had waited for him!

"You hairbrained fool!" he swore at Bandera. "I told you to get—"

A rattle of shots from above chopped his words off. Cori grabbed at his arm and they raced toward where the next house's corner thrust a vague gray angle through the murk. Made it—rounded it in a burst of bullets and falling plaster.

"God watches his own," Cheto muttered, panting. "We've slipped them—thanks to the Blessed Virgin! Quick—down this alley! There's—"

His words choked off in a startled curse. The way was blocked. Dark shapes were pouring into the alley ahead of them. The whistle of lead kicked dust up round them as gunfire spurted from the shapes running toward them. Marlatt's gun bit back, its flame stabbing whitely through the curdled gloom.

"Seño!" Cheto cried; and Cori pulled him after them through a door in the righthand wall.

Marlatt kicked it shut and they found themselves in pitch black darkness; but it was some relief to have shut those sounds out. This appeared, Marlatt thought, to be a substantial building, oddly in contract to the hovels round it. With quick, sure hands Cori shot the bolt. She turned then, breathless, and Cheto's panting voice gasped, "Jesu! God's mercy only can help us now, prala—"

"There must be some other door—"

"One knows it better than—"

Cori's voice said regretfully, "This is Bannerman's town house, Marlatt."

"TOWN house!"

"Si. It was the house of his senora, prala."

"Senora!" Marlatt sounded all tangled up. An edgy harshness scraped his voice. "Is the sheriff married?"

"Not now," Cori answered. "Lottie died last winter—poor soul, she had her share of burdens. She was Spanish and wildly in love with him. He broke her heart with his carryings on; he never cared no more about her than he cares for Shirly-Bell Ranleigh. Ambition is Nick Bannerman's god—he's the

friend of whoever best serves it." She said on a sudden, thoughtful note, "Don't underrate him, Marlatt; he's smart and he's quick—"

In the darkness Marlatt snorted. "He was quick enough naming me Kingfisher—"

"It isn't that," Cori said impatiently. "He thinks you're after Shirly-Bell—"

"I thought you girls hardly knew him—"

"You don't have to hug a polecat to know he's a polecat, do you?"

"What I mean—"

"I know what you mean." Perhaps it was Marlatt's lack of denial that made Cori's tone so curt. "You're wondering why he's so bent on Shirly when I'm the one that's heir to the Crescent." She said scornfully, "I told you Nick was smart, Marlatt."

Marlatt saw it then, and whistled. But before he could say anything more something crashed against the outside of the door; and they all knew what was happening then. The gang outside had fetched a timber or something and were going to hammer the door down.

"We've got to get out of here," Cori muttered.

Just like that pack of fools, Marlatt thought, to waste time trying to break down a door when they could quicker and easier have come through the windows. Perhaps if he smashed a window in some distant room they'd all rush round and forget this door. He decided to give it a whirl; but he had not taken two strides when he came hard against Cheto's outstretched arm. As though he had read Marlatt's mind Cheto said: "All the windows are barred, your honor."

Marlatt's head came impatiently round. "How well do you know this house, Cori?"

"I've stayed here. Carlotta and I were friends before—"

"There are no trick ways to get out—"

"I never saw any."

"Any way to get onto the roof?"

"That won't— Yes, there's a trap, but—"

"Roof flat or peaked?"

"Flat. This house has a tall, false front; it's a two-story house made to look like three—"

"Get up on the roof then—quick!" Marlatt snapped; and was wheeling off when the girl's hand caught him.

"Where—"

"On the roof," Marlatt growled. "Get up there before they bust—"

"Not till I know what you're going to do."

Impatience and anger roughed Marlatt's voice. "I'm goin' to try an' fool that gang away from here!"

"And if you don't?"

"You'll be no worse off on the roof than down here. And you won't be so likely to stop a bullet. Get her up there, Bandera, an' keep her there—"

Cori said, "Are you coming?"

"I'll come if I can," Marlatt growled, and went stumbling off into the darkness.

HIS plan was simple. If it worked, well and good. If it didn't they'd be no worse off than they already were. There was no good hiding here without they could give Tularosa's men considerable reason to think they'd got clear. If that thought could be sold them, any subsequent search of the building was bound to be more or less cursory; it might, anyway, exclude the roof.

In due course he found the house's front door and paused, head canted, behind it, listening. He could still hear them battering at the alley door. There was no sound coming from the front of the house. Very quietly, carefully, he drew the bar; pulled open the door,

slow fraction by fraction.

The night seemed light after the felted blackness inside the house. He caught no sign of human presence in the unlighted buildings across the way and, sardonically, he considered the fact pungent commentary.

He was turning back when he saw the man—a slouched black shape, forward bent and still, between himself and the open door.

CHAPTER XX

LUCK

THE loudest thing in Kane Marlatt's ears was the thump and pound of the heart inside him. There could be no doubt that the man had seen him; he'd been felinely waiting there for Marlatt's turning. Star's shine lay along the edge of his teeth. He'd a gun in his hand. It was cocked and leveled.

Why hadn't the fellow fired and dropped him?"

And then, suddenly, he knew. The same impulse had held his fire that had held Kane Marlatt's back on the roof. This man wanted him to know he'd reached the end of his rope—wanted him to know who it was that cut it; and with a kind of pleased surprise Marlatt recognized the man for Tularosa's pardner, the consumptive owlhooter, Curly Lahr.

Lahr said: "I been waitin' a long time for this," and fired point-blank.

But the shot whistled air across Marlatt's left shoulder as, dropping catquick, Marlatt fired from his knees.

He saw Lahr jerk, lurch a half step backward. He hung there briefly with his gaunt shape tipping; then his knees let go. The bony shoulders catapulted forward.

Marlatt paused, looking down at him; shrugged, and stepped over him, a faint distaste curled the corners of his mouth. In death as in life Lahr had no dignity. Sprawled in the road like a drunk in an alley.

There was no sound in this crouching night.

Abruptly then, noise came in plenty—the thump and clank of boots hard running. Marlatt stiffened as, above that tumult, harsh with fury, Tularosa's yell sailed high and clear. "Buck! Tim! Ed an' Wimpy! Git back to that door, you goddam fools!"

In the open front doorway Marlatt paused, stooped fast-thinking, and ripped off his spurs. He turned and flung them, tinkling, as far out into the street as he could; then jerked off his boots and, with them in one hand and Rand's cocked gun in the other, stumbled off through the house on a hunt for the stairs.

He was just starting up them when he heard the sharp, flat crack of exploding rifles. In a ragged volley they swept the alley; and swift cries—a scream, sheared the racketing echoes and, hard with anger, above this din came the bull-throated bellow of Sheriff Nick Bannerman.

Marlatt took the stairs three steps at a stride.

"Quick!"

It was Cori. She was at their top and grabbed his hand in the curdled gloom and dragged him panting down a hallway and through an unseen door to the right; and Marlatt, as her hand left his, heard her softly close it. She was back in an instant, swift guiding him to where a chair loomed vague as a ghost beneath a patch of star-flecked sky that was squarely set in the ceiling's center. A man's hatted head blocked the stars for a moment; and Cheto's voice gave thanks to the Virgin.

Marlatt said: "Didn't lock that door,

did you?" and Cori said angrily:

"Don't you think I've *any* sense?" Then he was boosting her up through the hole in the ceiling.

When she was clear he sheathed Rand's gun and pulled on his boots. "Can you pull me up, Bandera?"

"ARE you hurt?" Cori cried; and Bandera, crouched in the trap, reached down a hand. He was strong as an ox. He grunted a bit. But a moment later Marlatt was with them up on the roof; and the chair they'd stood in was with them too, for Marlatt had not dared leave it behind to be found, like an arrow, beneath the trap. He had brought it with him by thrusting a boot through its slatted back. Cheto settled the cover back down on the trap and followed them cat-footed across the roof to crouch beside them in the shadow of the building's false front. Two windows in it faced the street and Cori, curious, would have looked down from them had Marlatt not roughly yanked her back.

"Use your head!" he told her curtly; and was surprised when she hunkered beside him without retort.

Bandera said: "What now, your honor?" and Cori said, "What's all the noise about? They're sure getting rid of a lot of good cartridges. Must be shooting each other by all that yelling—"

"It's Bannerman," Marlatt told them quietly. "He's taken a hand with a couple of deputies." He turned narrowed glances where Bandera squatted. "Rand's dead. Somebody knifed him in the bunkhouse last night—Flack, I think; though I ain't real sure. Told me yesterday if anything happened to get hold of you. Any idea why?"

Cori said, "Then he *did* suspect it!"

Cheto nodded.

"Rand was bossing the Crescent then," Cori said to Marlatt. She kept her voice low lest they be discovered by the men they could hear ransacking the house. "He was off on a deal for some TX cattle when it happened. Cantrell wanted to fire him like he fired the rest of the Crescent hands when Flack took over, but I raised such a riproar they let him stay—I guess they figured he couldn't know anything anyway; but they've never left off watching him. They've never left me alone with him since. They never pretended to keep me away from him, but Cantrell always had somebody round."

"I still don't get it," Marlatt told her, puzzled.

"Senorita speaks of the horse, your honor—"

"Didn't you know my father was killed by a horse?"

Marlatt thought back. "Yes . . . I believe Rand did say—"

"Flack engineered that," Cori said bitterly. "The horse—"

"I thought Rand said the horse was one your father had got from some outfit—"

"Out of this country? It was," Cori said. "Nick Bannerman told Dad about it. Bad broncs were a sort of weakness with Dad—everyone knew it. Bannerman said there was an outfit up around Trinidad had the worst damn bucker he'd ever heard of. Nothing would do but Dad must have it. He wrote to this outfit and they made a deal—that was where Cantrell came into the business. He was the man who brought the horse down here."

"But he never went back," Bandera said. "He hung out in town—"

And after Dad was killed and Flack took over the Crescent on order of the court," Cori broke in, "the first thing Flack did was hire this Bob Cantrell to rod the combined outfits. Cantrell got rid of every Crescent hand but Rand; but— Tell him about the horse, Cheto."

"Seguro." Cheto said very softly,

"Your honour will be surprised to know I saw this caballo in Flack's corral three-four weeks before that time—es verdad. Blood of God, yes!"

"But I thought Cantrell—"

"He did," Cori told him. "This famous bucker, according to Bannerman, was at Trinidad. Dad wrote the outfit at Trinidad and got a reply from there. They agreed to sell and said they'd send a man down with the horse. Cantrell showed up with it; Bannerman said that was the horse all right, and—"

"Cantrell," Marlatt said, "was a Texan."

"You knew him?"

"I KNOW Texans," Marlatt said to Bandera: "Sure this was the same horse you saw in Flack's corral?"

"Same caballo."

"Did it buck?"

Cori nodded. "But nothing like Bannerman had led Dad to expect. Dad was so disgusted with the horse he said he was going to make it earn its cost and keep—"

'But it really was bad?"

Cheto said, "Crazy, senor! No sense —muy malo—a notch-tail killer—"

"What happened?"

"Dad was riding it after some spooky steers," Cori said, "and the horse went down and rolled on him."

"Kill the horse, too?"

"Killed now," Cheto said, and grinned at him. "Not killed then—"

Cori said bitterly: "It fell on purpose."

So it had been Flack, after all, Marlatt mused. Someway sly Ora had wangled Cori's father into naming him executor of Crescent and guardian of Cori and then, snake-cold, had cut the old man's string.

Thinking back over what he knew of the man, it was with a distinct sense of shock that Marlatt realized suddenly just how deadly Ora Flack really was. That bland, whiskered face F l a c k showed the world hid a savage cunning that would balk at nothing which might hinder the maturing of his own desires.

And what were Ora Flack's desires? Greed for money was probably one of them. Like enough, greed for power was another; the two, Marlatt reflected, usually tramped hand in hand. Abruptly then a preposterous notion caught at Marlatt's attention—a crazy kind of nightmare thought that sent cold chills up and down his spine till reason came to scoff it away. It could not be; Flack was slick all right, but not *that* slick. Only one other man did Kane Marlatt know who could stand in Flack's class—Craft Towner; but not even Towner could be *that* damn sly!

He found himself trying to visualize Flack behind the blur of those short-cropped whiskers; and another wonder laid its hold on him. Why had Towner tried to hire him to gun Flack?

Reflectively Marlatt said to Cori, "Rand seemed pretty well sold on the idea Flack's been layin' pipe to steal your outfit—"

"He's already stolen it—"

"That's the kind of rash statement will lose your case if you ever bring suit against Flack—"

"I'll bring suit!" Cori said fiercely; "I'll fight him through every court in the land!"

"And probably get a sight less out of it than you've got right now—"

"I've got nothing now; so what could I lose?"

"What could you fight with? Lawin'," Marlatt told her drily, "costs a heap of money—"

"I'll find someone to back me—"

"An' if he wins, how much do you reckon will be left time you've paid him?" Marlatt said shortly. "If it comes to a fight in the courts, you're licked. No matter what the outcome, you'll not get a nickel—

"NEVER mind. I'll do what I can for you—"

"I don't want your help!" Cori said fiercely.

"That," Marlatt drawled, "sums you up very nicely."

Even in the gloom he could see the anger glaring in her eyes. She was coldly furious.

Sounds from below were getting louder and louder. Searchers were combing the second floor now . . .

Nick Bannerman's voice just below them said, "No use, boys. They've got clear away by now, I reckon. His gang held us up—"

"What *I* can't get," another voice broke in, "is what they were doin' all that shootin' for. 'F I didn't know better, I'd of thought they was fightin' amongst themselves—they was tryin' to break in that door when we jumped 'em."

"A dodge," Bannerman said, "to make us think they weren't connected with 'em. Those were Kingfisher's men all right; an' Kane Marlatt's Kingfisher, no two ways about it. While they was puttin' on that show for us, Marlatt an' Bandera was makin' themselves scarce. You notice—"

"What about that bird we found out front? *I* didn't drop him—Buck didn't neither! He's the one helped Tularosa hold up the stage office."

Bannerman said, "There's no gaugin' the ways of a bunch like that crowd. Kind of guys run with Kingfisher's apt to do anything. They're a pack of wolves. Probably had a fight over some of their spoils. Well," he said, abruptly brisk, "we're wastin' time here. I'll get back to the office an' set things movin'. We may catch them yet. There's not many roads headin' east t o w a r d Texas . . ."

Sound of their boots moved toward the stairs.

Cori sneezed.

CHAPTER XXI

Down the River

NO PLACE, Marlatt thought, in all the world could be as still as this house had grown. It was an utter quiet, uncanny, breathless, brittle with import. He could almost hear the turn of men's heads as the trio beneath them stared at the ceiling.

A man's voice said, "By God!" and, right on its heels, another cried: "Where does that hatch go?"

Bannerman said, "On the roof. Fetch a chair."

Marlatt heard the words and did not move. Cori, too, was like a statue with dark eyes probing Marlatt fearfully, anxiously. Only Bandera showed life or movement. He got the makings out of a pocket and, with the smoke half rolled, let it flutter away from him. He turned in the starlight inspecting his gun, threw a quick searching look to where Marlatt squatted. Marlatt gave no heed; and Cheto sat there, fidgeting.

A chair creaked protest in the room below them. Bandera, growling, lifted his pistol.

"Sit down," Marlatt grunted, "and put that gun up."

Cori, turning, reached a hand out timidly. "Kane . . ."

"Well?" Marlatt did not look at her. This whole play hinged—

"I— I'm sorry, Kane."

"I guess we all are, Cori."

She swallowed hard; they could plainly hear her. "We could fight—"

"We been fightin'. You can't lick the law—"

"Nick Bannerman's—"

"I know. It doesn't change things. He's still the law; all the law we've got here."

"Law!" Cori's laugh was scornful.

"I'd sooner trust an Apache Indian! So you *are* a quitter. I was right after all."

Marlatt eyed her blackly. "What do you think I should do? Put a gun on Bannerman an' blow his head off?"

The lid came off of the hatch with a clatter. Above it showed a hatted shape and Marlatt threw his voice at it swiftly. "Your pot, Nick. Never mind the gun-play. We're yellin' calf rope."

A thin, startled silence spread across the roof. The shape in the hatchway climbed out warily. Burly shoulders pushed a head through the opening, and stars' gleam faintly winked from a pistol. "You're quittin'? *Givin' up?*"

Surprise was plain in Bannerman's voice, surprise hard-edged with a cold suspicion. "What's the dodge?" he growled.

"Has there got to be one?" A heavy kind of patience timbered Marlatt's tones. "Do I seem so goddam hard to convince?"

Bannerman peered through the gloom with a fishy stare. "There's somethin' wrong with this picture, bucko. You're up to somethin'—"

"If suspicion was doughnuts you'd be a bake shop, Sheriff—"

"Mebbe I would; but it ain't in reason for your kind of guy to kink his rope that way. I wasn't born yesterday! You're a Texas man, Fisher. It ain't in Texans to lay down like that. I've met a few of the breed and they'd all charge hell with an empty bucket. What kind of rusty you tryin' to cut?"

"Would it make sense if I told you we'd a heap rather be locked in your jail than dead on this roof?"

"It might if I could believe it."

MARLATT shrugged and, with a sigh, got up. The deputy's gun followed every move and Bannerman's eyes were hawk-sharp, watching. "That's a chance you got to take, I reckon," Marlatt drawled and, appearing indifferent to what they might think of it, unbuckled his gun belt and tossed it over near the edge of the roof. "You been wantin' to lock me up," he said. "Here's your chance—hop to it."

The deputy started for the rolled-up belt. "Lookout!" gritted Bannerman. "That may be a trick to get you over there an' shove you off—"

Marlatt's curt laugh fired the sheriff's cheeks. "Go on," he snarled. "Laugh hearty, bucko. When you're all through I'll do *my* laughin'." He looked at Bandera. "All right, sport. See how far you can heave that hogleg."

Bandera chucked his gun beside Marlatt's.

"Search 'em, Ed. Take Fisher first."

There was a bulky bandage around Bannerman's gun wrist. His pistol was awkwardly held lefthanded. A thought clicked over in Marlatt's head. He remembered something then. This white-haired sheriff was ambidextrous; the awkward display he made of that pistol was bait, pure and simple. Like his talk.

He *hoped* they would try something. The wish was plain in the twist of his shoulders as he called some muttered word down the hatchway to the deputy waiting in the room below.

Marlatt grinned to himself. This sheriff's ambition was riding him hard.

He stood with raised hands while the sheriff's man Friday slapped him over for a hold-out gun. He showed a weary indifference entirely deceptive; it barely concealed the relief he felt when the man stepped back, grunting, "Nothin' on him."

"Try his boots."

A hard grin twisted Bannerman's jowls as the man straightened up with the sixshooter Marlatt had got from his bedroll.

The chance was gone.

CHAPTER XXII

"Look Out!"

MARLATT paced his cell, trying hard to think where he'd made a wrong turn. What had he done that might better have been left untried and forgotten? Not surrender, certainly. He'd had no alternative. Fight? He snorted softly; took six steps, swung, took six back again. Not with Cori so like to get hit.

It was time to consider the future. Two things were likely. The townsfolk, scared of their shadows from talk of Kingfisher, might—if properly managed—come storming the jail with demand Kingfisher and Cheto be turned over to them. Bannerman would like that. So would Flack. Either, or both, might attempt to arrange it. It would solve a lot of things.

On the other hand there could be no mob action without the sheriff made public news of their capture. Such news entailed a serious drawback for the sheriff, if an honest man, could hardly fail to realize what Kingfisher's men would do in such case. This jail was vulnerable. If Kingfisher's men could spring Tularosa—

The thought called others to Marlatt's attention.

Everything hinged on one small point. The sheriff's official and personal integrity. If Bannerman were honest, just a blindly ambitious and headlong fool, he would keep the news of this coup to himself awhile. But if the sheriff was a rogue—

Boot sound running the narrow corridor drew Marlatt round to face the door. But it was only a jailer with Marlatt's breakfast.

"Has the news got out?"

The jailer said nothing. He pushed his tray underneath the grating, gave Marlatt a scowl and went tramping off.

Marlatt shrugged. He commenced his breakfast with a hungry man's relish. He was halfway through when boot sound again came down the corridor. "Visitor," his warder growled, and hauled off a ways to stand with a hand wrapped round his pistol, stiffly alert and suspiciously glowering.

It was a girl who came slowly up to the grating and stood with her cheeks pressed against the bars. A girl of plump curves and rouged hard features. Her fingernails were painted red. She had bleached yellow hair and dark brown eyes that were haunted and sullen as they swept over Marlatt from black hair to boot heels.

"So you're the sport Nick's callin' Kingfisher!" Her red lips curled in a short, hard laugh. "Do you know who I am?"

Marlatt shook his head. He had a good idea though; and the girl gave it confirmation.

"I'm Blond Mary—the one the Malone kid calls Nick's 'Plaza girl.' You want to leave this dump?"

"Yes?" Marlatt said; but the jailer strode forward, eyes bright with suspicion. He caught the girl's shoulder, whirled her wickedly round; with a brutal savagery slammed her back from the cell.

"Now, you—do your talkin' from there!"

EYES black with hatred the girl straightened the flutes of her stand-up collar. Then a cold reserve smoothed her cheeks inscrutably and, fingering the beaded cross that hung from a necklace bright against the black of her dress, she walked down the hall with composure; and with dignity let herself out.

Swearing under his breath the jailer tramped after her.

Ten minutes later the sheriff came

visiting.

Marlatt's cell was one of the last in the first-floor block; he'd no idea where they'd taken Cori or Cheto Bandera. He could not see them, nor had he heard them since arrival here. He asked Nick about it.

Nick was packing a shotgun and, by his look, was in high good humor. "Never mind," he grinned. "A man's first worry is for himself; an' you better get at it. The news is out."

"The news?"

"That I've got Kingfisher locked up in this jail." Sly humor looked from Nick's blue stare. "It's too bad, bucko. I'd hoped to prevent it; but one of my deputies had to shoot off his jaw. I tied a can to him but the beans are spilled now and it's too late to move you. If you know any prayers you better start sayin' 'em—because," a feline grin tugged the sheriff's wide lips, "at the first sign of trouble I'm takin' care of you."

He patted the barrels of his shotgun significantly. "Nobody's takin' *you* out of my custody."

Marlatt said nothing. He sat down on his cot with his lips tight clenched.

The jailer tramped up with a chair from the office. "That French number from the Plaza was here a while ago—"

"Was she now? You mean the blond one—Marie? Shinin' up to our prisoner, was she?"

"I dunno. I threw her out. She was actin'—"

"Tch, tch," the sheriff cluched. "You shouldn't have done that, Louie. I get a lot of good tips—"

"An' one of these nights you'll be gettin' a knife!" the jailer said sourly, and clanked on out to the office, muttering.

Bannerman chuckled. "Louie's soured on women." He tipped back his chair, braced booted feet on the bars of the grating and sat regarding Marlatt with a vast satisfaction, the shotgun handily cached in his lap. "How was that breakfast? Pretty good wasn't it, bucko? It oughta been; I told 'em to send you the best they had. Hell!" he grinned; "I aim to treat you right, Fisher."

Marlatt eyed him with a frozen calm. "Did you ever see Kingfisher, Bannerman?"

"You bet your sweet life—I'm lookin' right at him!"

"Blond Mary—"

"You don't want to pay no mind to her," Nick said airily. "She's got a mad on at me. Jealous of Shirly-Bell. Now *there's* a woman that'll bring a man somethin'! You're smart all right; I could see that when you first laid eyes on her—"

"If you've anything to do, Sheriff, don't let me keep you."

"Don't be so modest, bucko. You're the most important business ever stepped in this office. I'm stickin' right here till your gang tries to spring you—got your prayin' done yet?"

He laughed at the dark glint in Marlatt's eyes. "Tck, tck! You shouldn't take on so. You'll strain somethin' sure. As I was sayin', you showed good sense in pickin' Bell Ranleigh. She'll be a damn rich woman when Flack kicks off. But you made one mistake. For a brand artist, Fisher, you show almighty poor at readin' sign—"

"You're crazy in the head."

"Not so goddam crazy I don't know a claim jumper when I spot one! I filed on Ranleigh a long time back. When that girl marries she'll be marryin' *me*—that's a thought you can mull on while you're takin' the jump."

STOPPED by the window Marlatt stared through its bars.

"Hear the pounding, bucko? That's

your gallows. They'll have it done by noon. I've got the rope all bought—a brand new, stout one. 'Course," Bannerman winked slyly, "you could make a break for it likely if you got religious convictions against stretchin' hemp. Tell you the truth, I'd just as lief you would. 'S what I'm packin' this sawed-off for—eighteen buckshot lookin' right at you, nine in each barrel." And he laughed deep down in his throat, maliciously.

Marlatt said, "Have you got any smokin'?"

"Sure thing, Mr. Fisher. Anything you want. All you got to do is name it."

He tugged a Durham sack out of shirt pocket; tossed it through the grating, then papers and a match fished out of his hatband. "You can keep 'em," he grinned. "Light up an' smoke hearty, bucko. Compliments of two or three hundred outraged citizens."

All the groundfloor windows of the building were open but it was built of red brick and was hot as a furnace. Sweat made streaks of shine on their faces.

Bannerman had a baggy tweed coat to uphold, perhaps, the dignity of his office. It increased Marlatt's discomfort just to look at it.

There was a high roan flush on Marlatt's cheeks, but the sheriff misconstrued it.

"Tut, tut," he drawled with a fleering chuckle. "You may be tough over in Texas, Fisher, but it takes a real hombre to be tough here. We use fellers like you for baby fodder; an' that loudmouthed pard of yours, Ben Thompson—shucks! he wouldn't last two seconds here."

With Marlatt helpless in his power at last, Bannerman was malignantly set on enjoying himself, on paying back with compound interest all the things he held against him.

IT WAS half after nine by the slant of the sun when Louie yelled "Nick!" from the sheriff's office. "Your Plaza skirt's out here again—come a-runnin' before she wrecks the place. I've stood all her yap I aim to!"

The slam of a door brought the sheriff's chair down. A black scowl creased his cheeks; and he shoved the chair back away from the grating, carefully laid his shotgun down in it and, muttering balefully under his breath, went stamping off down the corridor.

"Marlatt!" Just a whisper of breath, but plain enough, the call pulled Marlatt back to the window. He squeezed his bronzed face hard against the bars and saw Oliphant peering up at him.

"You still got that roll you was flashin'?"

The stableman's meaning was plain enough. He referred to the currency Marlatt had shown while dickering for the blaze-faced roan. He still had it, for this was a hard-money country that had little use for the fluctuating paper currency put out by faraway banks in the East.

Marlatt nodded; and Oliphant—the horse-trading Yankee—said quickly: "Pass it out an' I'll—"

"Head for Missouri, eh?"

"Wouldn't be much out if I did, would you? Won't be findin' much chance to spend it in there—nor where you're goin' if you don't flit pronto. Chances are I can't help much anyhow; but cash talks, mister, if you want I should try. But think fast. She can't keep him there forever—"

"Got a pistol on you?" Marlatt tossed him the greenbacks.

"Here you are," grinned the stableman, and handed it up. "Louie's gone out but Ed's here someplace. Buck's at the Mexican's lappin' up booze. I'll be watchin' my chance. Quick's Bannerman starts for your cell again—"

"He's startin' now," Marlatt mut-

tered; and Oliphant vanished. But this gun was enough.

He turned from the window, folding his arms in a way that hid the gripped pistol behind his left elbow. A steely glint showed its flash in his eyes at the jingle and clank of Bannerman's spur rowels.

The sheriff hove into sight scowling. "Damn strumpet!" he snarled; and bent by the chair to pick up his shotgun.

Oliphant's hail came out of the office and Oliphant's boots rolled sound through the corridor. The sheriff, surprised, lashed round in a fury. One spur caught a chair leg and set the chair crashing. The double-barreled Greener hit the floor with a clatter, stopped with its stock just beyond the cell's grating.

"Flack said to tell—"

The nasal twang of the stableman's voice was lost behind the sheriff's bull bellow. "What the goddam hell you mean comin' out here! You—"

"Flack said—"

"Git!" That one purred word was soft and wicked. The sheriff's left hand was wrapped round a sixshooter.

Oliphant, still coming, said: "Flack —" and stopped. His staring eyes bugged out like saucers. "My Gawd— *Look out!*"

Like a snarling cat the sheriff spun. Black fury rolled across his cheeks and the lifting muzzle of his gun spat flame when he saw the pistol in Marlatt's hand. But the shot went wild, ricocheted off the grating. With a savage grin Marlatt squeezed the trigger.

The grin fell away. His face went blank.

Again and again he triggered frantically. But the hammer kicked down without result.

The stableman's pistol was loaded with empties.

CHAPTER XXIII

A Light Goes Out

MARLATT knew one moment of ice-cold fear. He crouched blank of eye, dismayed and frozen, while a million thoughts whirled through his head and he heard no sound but the thump of his heart.

Rage grabbed him then. "You greedy rat!" he said through clamped teeth, and hurled the gun at the tricky stableman with every ounce of strength he could summon.

The man let out a frightened bleat and the smug grin shaping his cheeks went twisted. The whistling pistol took him square in the chest and knocked him sprawling with a groan of terror.

Marlatt sprang on the instant, floorward and doorward, the roar and crash of the sheriff's firing banging round through the jail like a third alarm. Marlatt's mind knew one thing only, a raging desire, a white-hot urge to get his hands on that shotgun—and use it!

Bannerman was knowing a need, too —a fierce one. Face streaked with sweat and eyes like gun steel he stood spraddle-legged twelve feet away and drove his shots with a vicious cursing that neither helped his aim nor temper. His lead slapped the bars of the iron grating, whistled and thwacked and richocheted whanging—but it did not drop nor stop Kane Marlatt.

Perhaps it was that knife-slit wrist that made his firing so unnaturally faulty; he was doing his shooting left-handed, and Marlatt was not standing still for him either. And now Marlatt's hand was through the grating—was reaching for the sheriff's dropped shotgun.

Bannerman realized suddenly what was going to happen if he didn't get to

that shotgun first.

Marlatt saw the jerk and leap of his muscles; saw the big form crouch—saw the big form leaping. Bannerman's boots looked like housetops coming. With a grunt for the strain Marlatt's tense-stretched fingers touched the sawed-off, touched the butt of that double-barreled Greener. But he couldn't catch hold of it, couldn't quite budge it. His desperate fingers were an inch too short.

The sheriff's leap landed him full-tilt on it; his weight and momentum drove it out from under him—drove it hard at the grating of Marlatt's cell. Bannerman struck on his hip with a solid thump. The pistol went skittering out of his hand, his gleaming cheeks grimaced at the pain to his wrist, but his stubborn mind was locked on his purpose and he flung all his weight over hard on the barrel.

Marlatt cursed at the pain to the fingers ground under it; jerked them free and saw Bannerman, quick as a cat, slide clear and lock both hamlike hands round it. He meant to yank the weapon clear. He *yanked* it; but Marlatt caught a flying hold on the stock and kept it, though both trained arms were dragged through the grating and his heaving chest was against the bars. He kept his hold but he couldn't better it and Bannerman, snarling, twisted round on one knee and braced a boot on the grating—braced and tugged, with his sweat-streaked face gone knotted and purple, with the burly shoulders of him bulging his shirt.

Teeth bared and clenched Marlatt put all the strength he could get in that grip.

But it wasn't enough. The stock was slipping. His wet palms greased it. He could feel the thing oozing out of his grasp and then, like an eel, it was loose of him—gone!

WHEN Blonde Mary connived with the stableman, Oliphant, in the crackpot plan to get Marlatt free she was doing it, not from a sense of high moral principle or because she knew Marlatt was wrongly accused, but from a purely personal resentment of Bannerman. He had used her ill and, unless he were prepared to right matters pronto, it was Mary's intention to even the score. For some reason Nick set a deal of store by having this stranger locked in his jail. Very well! She cared not at all what scheme might be tucked up the stableman's sleeve; he was offering her a chance to get even with Nick and she meant to take it. If Nick wanted to do the right thing by her . . .

With her first look at Nick it was plain he didn't. He grinned at her hugely; patted her shoulder. "Well, well, Marie—how you doin' these days?"

"Never mind that!" She threw his hand off, angry eyes bright and hating. "You know what I'm here for!"

"An' you know what I told you last time." There was nothing complimentary in Nick's dark look. "The past is past an' damn well done with. I paid you off—"

"Look out I don't pay *you* off. I think I'll ride out and talk with Bell Ranleigh—Nick! You're hurtin' me—"

"I'll *hurt* you!" the sheriff snarled, and three times his cuffing hand went across her cheeks; then he grabbed her shoulder, roughly shoved her doorward.

"I'll tell Bell Ranleigh—"

"You go near Bell Ranleigh an' I'll—"

She called him something entirely unprintable and tried to get out when he suddenly jumped for her but her whirling skirt got stabbed on a bill spike that was bolted to the top of his desk. Bannerman's huge hands caught her. The next thing she knew she was

"Find Cori—"

"There's no use hunting these cells for that girl. Bannerman let her go first thing this morning—right after he'd locked you up—"

"What's that?" Marlatt cried; and then went stiff as the implication swept crowding in on him. "So Nick *was* a crook, after all!" he growled.

"—and a big bunch of riders left town right afterwards," Blonde Mary rushed on as though he hadn't spoken. "They lined out south on the trail toward Spraddle Bug and—"

Marlatt swore; described Tularosa.

"Yes. He was leading them."

Marlatt shoved the ring of keys at Cheto. "Go through this jail an' loose every man who's willin' to fight—send 'em down to the office to collect their hardware!"

In Bannerman's office three minutes later Marlott faced eighteen astonished and curious men. His questions revealed no felons among them; all had been jugged for minor offenses and one of them, oddly enough, was the Mexican, Gomez, Bannerman had bought the bay horse from.

"Boys," he said, "I'm in a jackpot. I been booked in this boardin' house as John King Fisher, the Texas outlaw, an' by the looks of the crowd pilin' up outside—"

"We get it," one of the cowboys grinned. "You're wantin' us to help you git out of here—"

"That's part of it. The rest of the play's apt to be more lively. There's a passle of gun throwers whackin' up dust on the Straddle Bug trail. I've an idea they're after the Crescent beef cut—"

"Which is what to you?" a lanky man asked.

"It's nothing to me, except I won't stand by an' see a girl stole blind—"

"What's the matter with Flack's hired gun fighters?"

"They may not be out there. Or they might be surprised—they might be a lot of things. I don't propose—"

"Where's the sheriff? An' what was all that shootin'?"

"Bannerman's dead. He accidentally shot himself—"

"He sure used up a heap of ca'tridges!"

Marlatt said coldly: "The point is I don't want that herd stole. You boys want to help me or had you rather stay nice an' safe in jail?"

Several of the men scowled. One or two muttered. The lanky man said, "There's somethin' queer here. Ain't you the gent they call Kane Marlatt? Then what's your connection? You a lawman—"

"I'm an operative," Marlatt said, "of the Canadian River Cattle Association—"

"That's a stockman's outfit. You acquainted with John W. Poe?"

"I BEEN workin' with him up till just recent. We're wastin' time," Marlatt growled impatiently. "Are you or ain't you wantin' chips in this fight?"

"Speakin' personal," the lanky man said, "I don't buy into a thing like this blind. I—"

Marlatt said to Bandera: "Put him back in his cell. Mebbe we better put 'em *all* back! We've got the wrong place, Cheto; we've blundered into a convention of parsons!" He swept them a caustic, contemptuous glance. "Where I come from men will *fight* for a woman."

Flush-faced the lanky man growled, "You got no call t—"

"Shut up!" And, to Bandera: "Get him back in his cell! Get 'em all back—pronto! We'll go down to the barrio libre an' see can we round up a few of them one-armed beggars that mebbe ain't scared to bust a few snivelin' laws—"

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"Hey—wait! Hold on," muttered a lantern-jawed runt whose legs were so bowed he looked like a wishbone. "How about it, boys? We goin' to let this galoot make talk like that at us? We goin' to pine away in this damn jail when he's offerin' us a invite on a silver platter to a jamboree that'll mebbe make hist'ry? C'mon, you curly wolves —let's heah yo' howl!"

He heard it.

The crowd outside must have heard it, too, for when, re-armed and with hats cuffed low across hard, squinted eyes, they sifted silently out into the sun-drenched street, there was not one bystander within sight of the courthouse. Not a team, not a dog—not even a gopher.

Ten minutes later, mounted on horses from Oliphant's corral, they took the south trail at a headlong gallop.

They rode grimly silent, rode hard and rode steady.

Marlatt's blue glance was opaque with his thinking. There must be no more mistakes, no more blundering blindly. These things followed patterns; all this violence suddenly got afoot was no mere vagary of chance. Like Bandera's role of Tio Felix there was a purpose back of it; a need, an object. Bandera had been forced to hide his identity because of Bannerman. Bannerman had been after the Mexican because Bandera held the key to what had been assumed the natural death of Cori's father. The sheriff would never have felt secure as long as Cheto was free to tell what he knew of the killer horse that had caused Malone's death.

A lot of knowledge was to be drawn from Bannerman's connection with that horse. What interested Marlatt was the hook-up with Flack. The events leading up to old Malone's death conclusively linked the sheriff with Flack. The sheriff had brought Malone news of the horse. Malone's death had brought Flack control of the Crescent. Control of the Crescent had made Flack powerful, and friendship with Flack kept the sheriff in office.

Flack was crooked. There seemed little doubt but what Nick Bannerman had been crooked also. He had clearly been in league with Flack—had been aiming to strengthen his hand by marriage with Flack's niece. The whole atmosphere of Flack's outfit smelled of intrigue and crookedness. There were too many cattle; not even the rustlers Flack claimed were working on him had kept the range from being over-grazed. This slick talk of rustlers must be more of Flack's slyness. Only one man in Marlatt's memory had been half as slick as this smug Ora Flack. That man was Craft Towner—born John King Fisher! Suave Craft Towner, rail thin and lightning fast on the trigger.

THEY were uncommonly alike, Craft Towner and Flack. Only Flack was fat and Towner lean. Marlatt remembered the ornate belt Flack had fingered, that cartridge belt with its odd gun contrivance. Not many men packed a gun that way. There was no creaking holster on Flack's fancy belt; a plate of metal with a slot was riveted onto it. A pin-headed screw, replacing the regular hammer screw of his pistol, was fitted into the slot and caught in a niche at its lower end, thus allowing the gun to hang open and swinging. All Flack had to do to see it smoking was squeeze the trigger. It did not have to be drawn. There was nothing to draw it from.

It seemed certain to Marlatt that Flack had been operating the combined Crescent and Straddle Bug spreads as a "distribution" ranch; a h o l d i n g ground and shipping point for cattle stolen from other parts. A place where blotched brands could heal while the cattle fattened on Santa Cruz grass. The coming of the railroad to this moun-

tain-ringed valley would have been the last neat touch to Flack's greed for Crescent. No better layout could have been found in the whole Southwest! No wonder the man was slavering for it!

Marlatt's lean jaw tightened as a new thought clicked through his surging mind. The connection! At last he had it! The reason Craft Towner had tried to hire him to come here and gun Flack! Flack and Towner had been working together—Flack and Kingfisher, rather, for Towner *was* Kingfisher. Flack, grown important and powerful, grown fat with pride, must have thrown Fisher over—gone in for himself. Locked away in this fastness, hemmed by mountains and deserts, he had thumbed his nose at the Texas outlaw—had sat back and was pocketing the profits himself! It was why he paid wages to so many gun throwers!

Another thought clicked into place. More than once Marlatt had wondered why, when Tularosa's men last night had rushed the stable, they had not killed Bannerman, helplessly pinned to the roof post by the knife Bandera had driven through his wrist. He could see why, now. The answer was so simple he felt a fool for not having sensed it sooner. Kingfisher's men had not killed the sheriff because Bannerman had been playing Kingfisher's game; he had been a needed part of this Tucson set-up. Here was explanation also for the cat-slick ease with which Fisher's gun boss, Tularosa, had been snaked from that almost impregnable jail once the sheriff's need of the man was done with.

But with these reckless riders Marlatt would force a showdown; he would break this gang up once and for all. Even as, already, he had set in motion the rumbling wheels that would rush King Fisher to a felon's death. For while the men he had taken from Bannerman's jail had been down to Oliphant's gathering horses he—Kane Marlatt—had been at the depot sending a wire to the Grant County sheriff, tipping him off to Craft Towner's identity. In a few short hours the New Mexican authorities would have King Fisher behind stout bars.

And then a vague unease got into Marlatt, an inexplicable premonition of disaster he could neither explain nor shake.

It had to do with Cori in some fashion—that much he understood at once. Just as in these last few hours they had, each of them, grown much closer to the other. He realized this with a sense of shock—of disloyalty to Shirly-Bell; of surprise and, almost, of consternation. It startled him to realize the new respect he had conceived for Cori.

WHEN they paralleled the last notch of the Tucson Mountains, Marlatt signalled a brief halt to breathe their horses; and all the time they were resting there Marlatt tramped the burning dust of the trail with hands locked behind him, his dark face scowling and a devil of worry in the looks he kept swinging at the lowering sun.

Bandera attempted to reassure him. "Be at peace, amigo. We will catch them—if not here, then before they reach the Empires, surely. They will make poor time with all those cattle."

"An' there's the question of water," declared the lantern-jawed man. "They'll have to gear their pace to the variance in miles between the known waterholes—"

"I was not thinking of the cattle." Marlatt raised an arm for the group's attention. "I'm goin' to leave you yonder. You'll take your orders from Bandera, boys. He used to ride for Crescent an' knows this range like the palm of his hand. When you come up with Tularosa's bunch they'll be usin' their rifles—don't be scared to use yours. There ain't a man in that crew but

HOW long she'd been calling Marlatt didn't know; but it was Cori's voice that finally roused him. His opened eyes saw a blinding light that gradually dimmed to the pale yellow glow of one lone lamp; and he realized then that, once again, he was stretched out prone with his head soft-pillowed in a woman's lap—in the same woman's lap!—in Cori Malone's!—in a room plumb filled with grinning faces!

He struggled to rise but, as they'd done before, her hands restrained him. As in a dream he heard her say, "Better wait a bit, cowboy, till the world quits spinning."

And wait he did. He felt weak as a kitten, and mighty foolish till he heard her say, "You mavericks clear out of here. Mosey over to the cook's shack an' favor a lady by shakin' up some supper."

Bandera snickered but filed out with the rest. When they were gone Marlatt opened his eyes again. The room still looked pretty much of a wreck. He said, "What happened? What'd they do with Flack's body an' where's Bell Ranleigh?"

"She's gone off with Flack's body—"

"Gone what?"

She let him get up. "You better get this straight. They've both lit out—"

"What do you mean 'lit out'? I put that hawg-sticker—" He broke off to scowlingly look where she pointed. Then he saw the feathers, and a great light washed all the questions out of him, as he remembered Craft Towner's voice shouting "By God—"

It was all mighty plain now he saw all those feathers strewn over the floor. No wonder Ora Flack had reminded him of Towner—Ora Flack *was* Townor! Behind whiskers and a feather-padded belly. And Towner, of course, was Kingfisher—John King Fisher—wildest brain in the whole Southwest, the trickiest outlaw that had ever quit Texas.

No wonder sly Ora had kept ahead of him. He had known all the time who Marlatt was. But it was as Craft Towner he'd pulled his slickest stunt. Trying to hire Marlatt to gun Ora Flack! That had been *real* cute!

Marlatt saw it all now. Kingfisher, seeing the game up as Towner unless his men finished Marlatt, had made that offer to discover if Marlatt knew him as Ora Flack also. When he found Marlatt didn't, he had hit the trail, leaving Tularosa to deal with Marlatt. As Ora Flack he must have been pretty startled when Marlatt showed up with the girls that day. He must have been equally startled when Marlatt showed up tonight.

Well, he'd got away.

Marlatt looked at Cori. He said lugubriously, "Go on—let's have it."

"Think you can stand hearing the truth about Shirly? She was—"

"Yeah," Marlatt said, "we can forget that dame with profit. I been taken in all around. The guy we've known as Ora Flack was King Fisher, the Texas outlaw. What happened after the lights went out?"

"You jumped for Ora and he hit you with a chair. He must have been pretty scared of you—"

"Never mind smoothin' it up for me. Did the boys save them cattle?"

She nodded, watching him. He started to run his hands through his hair, winced and tramped the room darkscowling. Abruptly he stopped and faced her, frowning. "Cori," he said, "I've been one big fool— Oh, I don't mean about Kingfisher. I'll get the last laugh on him yet; they'll grab him quick's he shows in Grant County. I mean about *you*. I been a—"

And that was when Cori grinned up at him. "I've been quite a fool myself," she said. "Do you reckon we could start over even?"

hall like the wrath of God. He kicked Flack's office door wide open.

Lamplight trapped him blinking there, stopped cold and frantic by the sight before him.

CORI, with her man's woolen shirt peeled down off one shoulder, sat roped to one of the hide-covered chairs, bound tight and brutal but in such fashion her hobbled right hand could reach without effort the pulled-up table and the pen, ink and paper so confidently laid there. Handy and lazy in a chair beside her, sprawled Tularosa.

A small fire glowed on the hearth nearby. From its heap of coals a length of metal protruded, a slender bar of iron —a running-iron, illegitimate marker of stolen cattle, cherry-red at the end shoved into the fire. Above it crouched sly Ora Flack with his devil's lips smiling as he told the girl with reflective tolerance: "It's entirely up to you, my dear. If you'd rather have your pink little hide all decorated up than sign over something you haven't got anyway, you'll soon have a—"

That was when, with a crash, the office door flew open. For one split second the tableau held while a clatter of heels rushed sound from the hallway. Tularosa gave one strangled shout and leaped from his chair with both hands clawing.

They never touched leather; never brushed his gun butts. Two explosions belted the air of the place. Both shots struck Tularosa hard.

Flack had instantly whirled and stood now, crouched, with his cheeks sheet-white; with his spraddled hands empty. And because Flack's gun, with its ornate belt, lay plain on the table a good seven feet from the ranchman's hand, Marlatt held his fire. He couldn't drive slugs through an unarmed man—could only glare like a fool and curse the luck that must give this fiend the final laugh. For how could the law cope with sly Ora Flack? The man's power and his influence would laugh in its face.

With a bitter oath Marlatt sheathed his gun. "Untie Miz' Co—" He was stopped in mid-speech by the gleam in Flack's eye. But like Cori's screen the look came too late. Even as Marlatt's hand swiped hipward another hand closed round his gun butt. He realized with shock it was Shirly-Bell Ranleigh's.

The girl's hand had the gun clearing leather when Marlatt's fist slapped down on its barrel. But the girl was too shrewd—too quick for his purpose. A backward lunge ripped the weapon away from him. He had to wheel or let her gun him.

He spun and, cat quick, struck it savagely. Yet even as the six-shooter flew from her grasp he heard Flack spring.

With frantic haste Marlatt dropped to his knees—tried to throw himself sideways. The rancher's weight slammed into him headlong. He tried to roll free but Flack's leg blocked him. "Smash the lamp!" Flack gritted; and that was when Marlatt saw the knife—coming pellmell toward him in Flack's left hand.

Marlatt writhed, brought a knee lunging up at that driving hand; it caught Flack's elbow, wrung a snarling groan from him as the knife fell clattering from his nerveless hand and the light snuffed out in a burst of glass.

Flack had rolled clear—was on his feet, tall shape outlined against the shadows round him when Marlatt's searching hand found the knife. All his bottled rage was in the leap that sheathed the blade in Flack's fat belly. But it was Craft Towner's voice that said, "By God—"

And everything went black.

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BLOOD AND TEXAS ON HIS BACKTRAIL

By
H. A. DeROSSO
Author of "Last-chance Lead for Satan's Segundo," etc.

The bank robbery and murder on his backtrail wasn't the worst of it—the stranger was also a Texican!

The outlaw grasped Linda's wrist, as he covered Cameron with his sixshooter!

HE WAITED until Jim Shaw and Linda were out of sight, and then Corey Cameron shut the front door of the Bon-Ton. He hadn't been conscious at all of the cold seeping through his clothes as he stood in the half-opened door or of the snow that had fallen and lay, still unmelted, on his hair and shirt.

He'd known only a great sadness and the knowledge that it would be only a few more days that Linda would work in the Bon-Ton and then one night she'd go away as usual with Jim Shaw, but she'd never come back. For Linda would be Jim Shaw's wife . . .

Cameron reached up and pulled down the big lamp that hung from the ceiling and blew out the flame. The darkness that invaded the small restaurant was not complete for an inch of snow lay on the street outside, and the night was never as black as when the ground lay uncovered.

He recalled that he had not barred the back door, so Corey Cameron started for the kitchen. He'd come to know every inch of the place the few months he'd been there and, though his crippled left foot was a twisted, helpless, fumbling thing, he passed into the kitchen without stumbling over anything.

The kitchen was still warm with the heat of the dying stove, and there was the acrid smell of grease and the odor of cooked things that was sickeningly sweet in his nostrils. And he wondered how it would feel to be in the kitchen, red-faced from the heat of the stove, without Linda out there in front, taking orders and calling them to him in her faintly husky voice.

His fumbling foot tangled with the leg of a table and almost sent him sprawling. Curses spilled from Cameron's lips and a vast and futile rage engulfed him. It was all the fault of that crippled foot. . . .

He was still young, in his middle twenties, and his features were not unpleasant and he had an affable way about him. He was at the age when a man planned and dreamed and built for the future, but not Corey Cameron. . . .

Suddenly breaking through his anger came a soft, mild laugh. "What's eatin' you, Corey?"

Cameron pulled up, startled. He was almost to the rear door and his eyes, accustomed by now to the darkness, made out the black figure of the man propped against the doorjamb. It was hard to make out anything about the man except the white blob that was his face and the leveled sixgun in his hand. But Corey didn't need much more than the voice for recognition.

"Bob!" Cameron whispered. "Bob Buford!"

"The same," came Buford's soft reply and he chuckled again.

"What—what's the big idee, Bob? What you got a gun on me for?"

"I've come for you to put me up," Buford said, and his voice was hard all of a sudden.

Corey was silent. Then he murmured, "You're a long ways from home to be in trouble, Bob. It's a long ways to Texas."

"Yeh," Buford said bluntly. "It's a long and plumb unhealthy ways back to Texas. I'm in a tight, Corey, and you're helpin' me out."

"I reckon it's the N. P. job. I heard Shaw, our deputy, talkin' about it. So you were in it, Bob?"

"Yeh!" and Buford's voice was metallic. "Don't it set right with you, Corey? Do I have to answer to you?"

Cameron smiled. "Don't get all het up, Bob. I ain't never bothered myself with your turnin' bad. I've had troubles of my own. . . But it was a damn fool job."

"Sure," Buford gritted. "You're laughin' at me, Corey! Well, go ahead. I got the last laugh comin'. I know I played the fool. We was a little too sure of ourselves. The express messenger wouldn't open the car and then when we blasted our way in and took the money, we found out it wasn't even signed! So new the money was, it didn't even have the treasurer's name on it! Not worth a hang, the whole lot of it.

"The whole country has riz up, Corey. I ain't got a chance to get away. I'm a stranger here and a Texas man and they'll get me sure if I don't lay low until this blows over."

"What about the others? There were

five of you."

"I quit them," Buford snarled. "The whole brainless lot of them I quit! No sense at all in them."

"How did you know I was here?"

"We come through here three-four days ago. The boys stopped in here for a bite to eat. I didn't come in because I'd spotted you and I didn't want to show my face. So this is where you and Linda wound up?"

Corey's voice was suddenly flat and final. "I'm sorry, Bob. There's nothin' I can do!"

"You'll hide me, Corey! Where or how ain't my concern. You'll have to figure that out."

CAMERON'S lips twisted in a wry grin. "You're puttin' an uncommon lot of trust in me, Bob. We was kids together, but we broke off bein' close when you took to ridin' nights. I ain't obligated to you no way at all."

"Mebbe so," Bob Buford said, and his voice held a dry, mocking tone. "But I heard the boys talkin' about the good food served in that eatin' place run by Corey and Linda Cameron—brother and sister. So you didn't marry her, hey, Corey?"

"You better be gettin' on, Bob!"

"I'll have my say first," Buford said, laughing grimly, "and then I reckon you won't want me to go. I know how you was always sweet on Linda Baker. She used to come down to the livery where you worked and you'd fall all over that bum foot of yours to lick her hand. There wasn't a thing you wouldn't do for her if she'd ask it. That's why you run off with her.

"She didn't want to marry a certain gent down in Texas and there was no other way out for her. So you run off with her. You came mighty far, way up here in Montana, and it was just by accident I run across you. And, Corey, I reckon the folks hereabouts have swallowed that yarn about you bein' brother and sister."

Corey was breathing hard. He could see the white flash of Bob Buford's teeth when his lips pulled back in a hard, sardonic grin.

"Now listen good, Corey," Bob Buford was saying. "You're gonna hide me out. You could turn me in, but then I'll have to say that you and Linda ain't brother and sister. I won't have to say more. The town will take it up from there. They'll do a good job on you and Linda—especially her!"

Cameron was aware that his brow was moist and that a dryness parched his throat. "Look, Bob. There's no place I can hide you."

"You've gotta find something, Corey. You see, if the law catches up with me I'm gonna talk. Tell about how you and Linda come all the way from Texas together and you wasn't married."

Corey took a step ahead, his fists clenching. "Damn you, Bob! I'll shut that dirty mouth of—"

The click as Buford cocked his .45 was abnormally loud in the stillness of the darkened kitchen. "My finger's been almighty heavy on the trigger of late!"

Cameron halted. Sweat was streaming down his face. "All right," he said. "All right, Bob. I'll fix you up. But you'll have to pull out soon as the hullabaloo dies down."

Buford laughed. "Suits me. I ain't got no love for this here country. Now, Corey, where-at you gonna put me?"

Corey pointed at the ceiling. "There's a little attic up above. It's sort of crowded and cramped, but no one ever goes up there. I haven't been up myself for more than a month. Linda has never been up there. It's all I have!"

"I ain't in no spot to be particular, Corey. And then, I can come down here and stretch my legs at night. Okeh, Corey, play square with me and I'll

keep mum. But don't let the law catch wind of me!"

It was during the mid-morning lull that Linda Baker came into the kitchen. Cameron had all the potatoes peeled and washed and the beef roast was in the oven and he was sitting on a table, catching a brief smoke. The Crow squaw, who washed the dishes, had finished and had gone outside.

Linda stopped just inside the door. Of late her smiles for Corey were sort of tight and stretched and her blue eyes wouldn't meet his face.

They stood there, awkwardly silent, until Linda said, "We better settle about the Bon-Ton, Corey. I want you to have it.

"You've been good to me, Corey. There's no one else I could have trusted like I did you. I know it was my money that bought the Bon-Ton, but I want it to be yours after—after I've married Jim. Please don't be too proud, Corey. It's not—charity or anything like that. You've earned it, the way you've helped me."

He kept staring at his crippled foot—the left foot that had caught in the stirrup of a stampeding bronc and ended his career as top-hand bronc-buster in the Nueces country.

"I'm goin' away in a few days, Linda."

SHE had no words right away, so great was her surprise. "Corey?"

He forced a smile. "This ain't the life for me. Runnin' an eating place, cookin'— Why that's no life for a man, Linda! I stuck to it to help you out. Now that you're—settled, I'm goin' away."

"But what'll you do, Corey? Where'll you go?"

He had to have some excuse, he felt, so he blurted out without much thinking: "I'm gonna ride again."

He looked up and he thought he saw tears in her eyes. Her lips moved as if she wanted to speak, but he knew why no words came. She knew that his statement was a bald-faced lie.

"Where's Jim?" he asked, to change the subject.

"He's out after those bandits again. Sheriff Hudson came for him early this morning. They think they have a lead on the holdups. I hope they don't have trouble." And she bit her lips.

"Jim's all right," Corey said cheerfully. "He's the equal of half a dozen sneakin' bandits. Don't you worry about Jim Shaw, Linda."

She was about to turn away, but she stopped and said, "I've been hearing noises in the attic, Corey. What could they be?"

He shrugged, trying to keep his voice unconcerned. "Probably a rat."

It was the next afternoon that a sharp cry and call from Linda brought Corey to the front of the Bon-Ton. They stood in the doorway, watching the cavalcade riding down the snow-covered street toward the jail. Sheriff Bill Hudson and Deputy Jim Shaw rode in the lead and behind them were four horses. One of the ponies carried a dead man. The other three riders were sullen-eyed and week-old beards stubbled their chins. One of them had a bloody rag about his head.

Jim Shaw raised a hand and grinned at Linda. "He's not hurt at all," she whispered. "He's safe and sound."

"I told you Jim could take care of himself," Cameron murmured, adding, "Looks like they got them all."

"But there were five," Linda said.

"Yeh, five," Corey replied and then he went back to the kitchen, dragging his clumsy foot.

He found it hard to keep his mind on his work. All during the supper hour he kept forgetting orders and sending out wrong dishes, until Linda asked him, "What's wrong, Corey? Don't

you feel well?"

He pressed a hand against his forehead and forced a smile. "A little headache. But I'll be all right. Go on now. Don't keep the customers waiting."

This was Linda's last night in the Bon-Ton. In the morning she'd accompany Jim Shaw to the justice of the peace and there would be another girl out front. . .

He glanced up, at the trapdoor that led to the attic, and Corey shoved his right hand under the loose folds of his apron and pressed his fingers against the smooth handle of the Colt .45 he had taken to wearing in his waistband since Bob Buford had come.

Corey had had no further trouble with Buford. At night, after Linda had gone and the lights were doused, Buford would come down from the attic and Cameron would lay out food on the table. They never talked much.

The evening wore away quicker than Cameron had ever recalled. Perhaps because of Linda's leaving. . . He was hardly aware of it, but here it was almost ten o'clock and Linda had laid away her apron and was primping her hair and humming to herself as she waited for Jim Shaw.

The Crow squaw had just finished washing and wiping dishes and now she went out the back door, leaving Linda and Corey alone for the moment.

At length Linda said, "Well, Corey, think you can get along without me at the Bon-Ton?"

Corey grinned. "I dunno. It'll be hard to find anyone as purty as you. That's why I made you work out front. To sort of draw business. I reckon there'll be a terrible fallin' off of customers with you gone."

She flushed, murmuring, "Aw, now, Corey. Quit your joshing." He paused, then: "Are you still set on leaving?"

"Yeh."

"But why, Corey? If you're tired of the Bon-Ton, why, Jim will give you a job at his ranch. You'd like that."

He averted his head so that she might not read the truth on his face. "It's not that," he said. "I'm just home-sick for Texas, I reckon."

THERE was a stirring up in the attic and a rasp as the trap-door was flung open. Linda glanced up and screamed. Bob Buford slid out of the hole and dropped to the floor and a gun was in his right hand.

Linda had fallen back until she brought up against the wall. Bob Buford's eyes were wild and his face looked gaunt and mean.

"Howdy, folks," Buford leered.

"You fool!" Corey hissed.

"Aw, dry up," Buford snarled irritably. "You won't have me around much longer, Corey. I'm leavin' you." A harsh laugh slipped from him. "I reckon that about breaks your heart?"

"You won't have a chance," Corey said. "They'll pick you up in no time."

Linda was staring at the outlaw. "Buford!" she whispered.

"Yeh," Buford said, laughing, "Bob Buford. I reckon you saw me around Split Rock before the Rangers took to huntin' me. We never was introduced, lady, but we're gonna come to know each other real well before many days."

A cold lump had come to Cameron's throat. "What you aimin' to do?" he demanded, knowing even as he asked what the outlaw's purpose was.

"Alone I wouldn't have a chance," Bob Buford said. "But I'm takin' this here Linda gal with me. I'm gonna put a gun against her head and the first man to try to stop me, why—I'll just blow her brains out."

"You won't get away with that, Bob!" Corey growled.

"I'll try, anyhow! Besides, I'm sick of that damn attic. Seems like I got the

seven-year misery in my bones. Can't move or bend over without my joints cracking and squeaking. And that damn place is dirty, Corey! I'm gettin' out while the gettin's good. I looked through a knot hole this afternoon and I saw that posse. I'm goin'—and don't you try to stop me!"

The outlaw reached out with his left hand and caught Linda's arm. "Come on," he growled. "We're gettin' ourselves some hosses and leavin' before your deputy comes around."

He had taken his eyes off Corey momentarily and now Cameron called softly: "Bob!"

The outlaw whirled, a curse freezing on his lips as he spied the sixgun in Camerons' fist. Desperately Buford swung his sixshooter to cover Cameron, but the outlaw was too slow. The .45 in Corey's hand bucked and roared and then Buford was on his hands and knees, reaching for the weapon that had fallen from his fingers.

Corey hobbled ahead and with his crippled foot he kicked the .45 out of reach. Buford looked up at Cameron, and Corey saw the blood on Buford's chest. All the strength seemed to desert the outlaw and he sank to the floor.

Corey heard the front door open and hurrying steps toward the kitchen, and Jim Shaw burst inside. Linda went to him, burying her face on his chest while he stared, stone-faced, from Cameron to Buford, bleeding on the floor.

Buford had noticed Shaw. The outlaw coughed. "Ah, damn you, Corey," he said weakly. "You should've killed me right off. . . I can still talk. . ."

A hot rage pulsed through Cameron and he flung up his gun and thumbed back the hammer again, but Shaw, shoving Linda aside, stepped in and wrested the gun from Corey. Shaw didn't say anything, but there was horror and unbelief in his eyes as he stared at Cameron. Buford began to laugh.

"Listen, Shaw," he said. "Listen good. They ain't brother and sister. She's Linda Baker. Both from Split Rock, Texas. She didn't want to marry a gent down there, and she talked Corey into takin' her away. They ain't married or nothin'.

"Corey always was crazy about her. But with his bum foot he never dared to tell her. He's dumb in a lot of ways, Shaw. Damn fool dumb! He hid me out just so I wouldn't spill all this about Linda. He'd risk his neck just to keep her name clean so that she could marry you! He's a damn fool, Shaw, but he concealed a criminal. Run him in on that charge, Shaw, and then run Linda *Cameron* out of town. . ."

THEN Linda was crying softly, and Corey, seeing that he was unnoticed, slipped out the back door.

He heard running footsteps after him and then Linda had caught him and her arms were around his neck and her lips on his. And she kept crying over and over . . . "Oh, Corey. Oh, my Corey. I never knew you cared. You never told me, never gave me an idea."

"But—but you're promised to Jim!"

She shook her head. "That's all off."

His lips tightened. "So he believed it!" he growled.

"No, Corey. Jim's too fine to believe anything like that. He just felt that I should have the best man. That's all."

"I'm not much, Linda. And I haven't anything. And—and I can't ride. . ."

She smiled and placed her fingers over his mouth. "Hush, Corey. We'll find a way. Jim says there's a big reward on Bob Buford and you'll get it all. We can buy a ranch, Corey, and we'll make a go of it. Jim won't say a word about you hiding Buford. We'll find a way. . . Will we, Corey?"

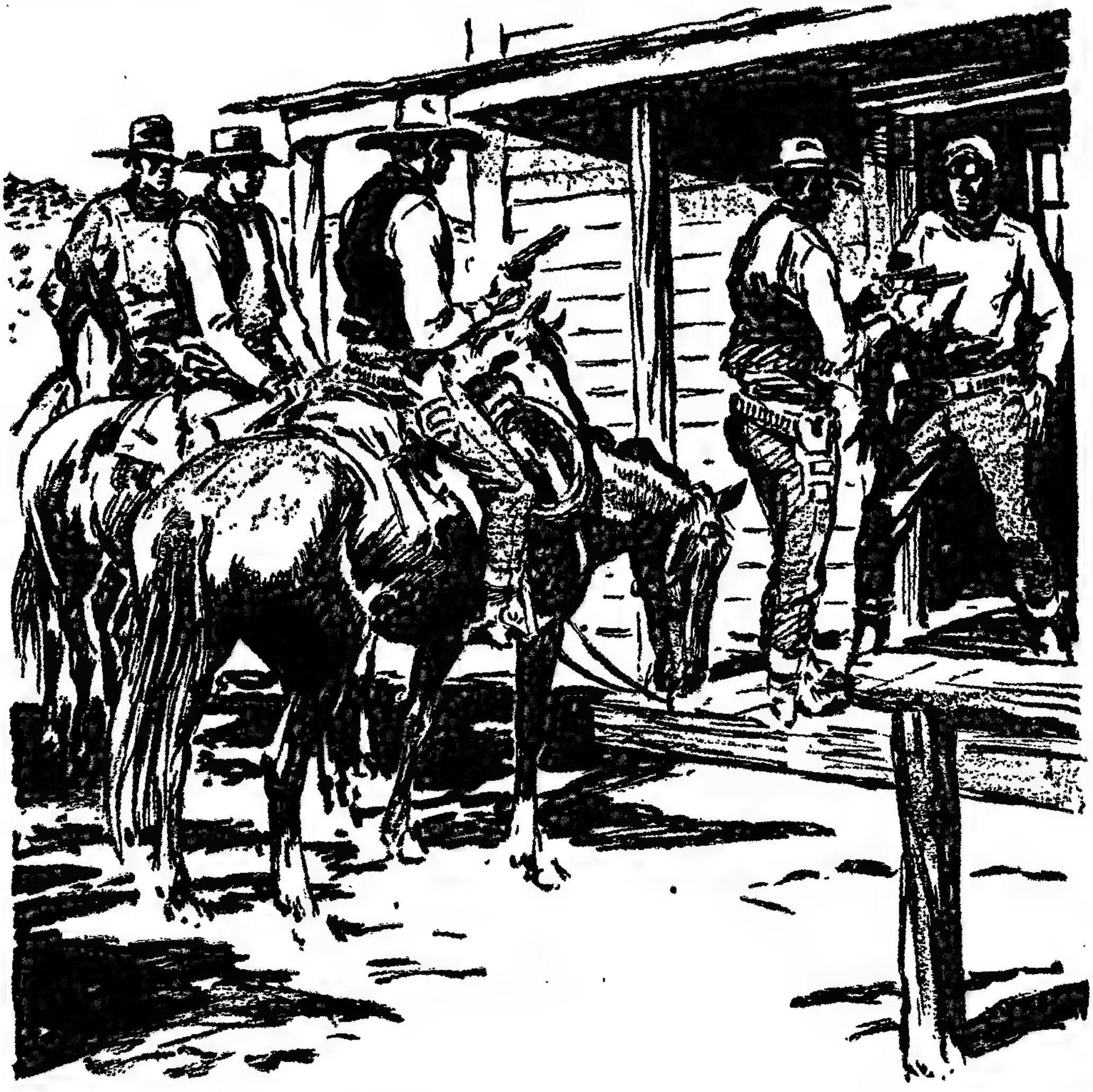
He smiled and there was a lightness in his heart such as he had not known in years. "Sure, Linda. We will. . ."

MANHUNT TRAIL TO HELL

By D. B. NEWTON

Author of "Be Fast, Battle-Cub, or Hire Boothill!", etc.

The Ladder Outfit had no easy jobs—Kemp would have to ride hard, if he was sticking, and work hard, and keep his holsters oiled and tied-down-low!



Guns drawn, Ferd Ivers shoved the man back into the house!

CHAPTER I

Recruit for the Manbreak Legion

AT THAT moment, Bill Kemp was closer to despair than he'd been in all his twenty-eight years. So bitter indeed were his thoughts that he hardly tasted the burn of the whiskey he tossed into his throat. For he had to admit at last that this manhunt looked too big for him; and there was so little time left—so damn little time!

And yet, strangely, it was in that very moment of greatest discouragement that he got the first real clue. After all these weeks of endless riding,

and the same blank look and shake of head meeting his cautious questions, all down the weary miles of the cattle ranges south of Sandoval, here it lay waiting for the mere glance of an eye. He saw it now, and the next moment was setting down his glass carefully, with a hand that trembled a little from new hope.

It wasn't much—just an old blackboard with a piece of chalk tied to it by a string, that was propped against the backbar of the Trail Dust saloon for the range to use in posting bulletins. On its face, gray with the chalk dust that had been ground into it over a number of years, there was now only one sign—crudely printed letters that stated briefly: *"The Ladder Needs Top Hands—Plenty of Them at Good Pay."* But it gave Kemp a glimpse of something even bigger than he'd thought to find, when he began this grim, life-or-death mission. A glimmer of something tremendous. . .

There was no one in the big, cool room other than himself and a bored bartender who figured Bill Kemp was only another puncher in off the sun-smitten trails. Fighting down the eagerness that struggled to show itself upon his flat, hard features, Kemp drew the man's attention to the call board with a careless flick of his thumb.

"Know if that still goes?" he asked.

The barkeep nodded shortly. "Ferd Ivers ain't ever told me to rub it out."

"He the Ladder boss?"

"Yeah." The man played a glance over Bill Kemp's lean, tired frame, and something in the weariness that showed in every line of him appeared to rouse the other's sympathy a little. He frowned. "I better give you warning, friend. Ivers is a hard hombre to please. Since he's had the Ladder plenty have tried on, but most don't stay long. Word's getting around that he's a manbreaker, and you gotta be able to take it if you want to hang up your spurs with his outfit."

"People just now finding it out?" Kemp spoke casually, yet angling for information with a bait of well-chosen words. "How does that happen! Is he new around here?"

"Came into this country about four months ago—bought the Ladder spread from Joe Hardesty, who used to own it. Kind of too bad about Joe, at that," the barkeep went on, "walkin' away and leavin' the ranch lock, stock and barrel, with only a thousand or maybe fifteen hundred in his pocket to show for all the years he put into it; and most of that going for debts. Can't blame Ferd, though, for grabbin' a bargain. If he hadn't been willin' to take over the bank's note, Joe would have lost it all, anyway, and for nothin'—"

"Yeah." Kemp hadn't listened to most of this—typical barkeep's gossip. What he wanted to know had been contained in the first few words, and the rest didn't interest him. He flipped a coin on the bar in payment for his drink. "S'posing I try for this job. Where do I find it, and how do I know Ivers when I see him?"

The man told him the way. And he described Ferd Ivers: "Big hombre, sort of dark. Mustache."

And that fit, too, so far as it went; though of course a lot of men had mustaches. . .

The Ladder was a good outfit, judging from the range Kemp saw on his eight-mile ride from town. Rich bluestem, and plenty of cattle with the criss-crossed Ladder brand. Manbreaker or not, the new owner seemed to be making it pay.

The house and ranch buildings stood on a swell of ground where the wind made music among shade trees. A trio of men who were seated on the porch—two in cane rockers, one perched on the rail with a holstered six-shooter sag-

ging awkwardly from his belt—looked up as Kemp reined in; they fell silent, and one hitched to his feet and came forward to stand at the railing with arms akimbo. It was Ivers, himself.

Yes, in general, he did fit the description of one of the men Kemp had been looking for during the last month and a half. Though you couldn't be sure. And now, since learning what he had in the Trail Dust, he couldn't simply ask the man to identify himself. No, the whole thing was on a different basis now, and there could be a lot of danger in it.

And there still remained the other one, that had a passion for wearing the color green. He wasn't in this trio on the veranda, but he might be around the ranch. Bill Kemp had to know.

Ferd Ivers was staring at him, with no welcome in his hard eyes. He said, "Well?"

"I understand you're looking for a hand," Kemp said.

"You saw the notice in town, huh?"

Something warned Kemp as he was about to answer. Something said that it all depended on how he answered that question, and that the wrong word now would cripple his chances. He turned his nod into a shrug. "You mean that sucker bait at the saloon? Yeah, I did see it, as a matter of fact; but that's not why I'm here. A fellow back in—Wyoming put me onto you."

A look of interest building in Ivers' face told him he'd guessed right. He'd steered past the first rock; but the rapids were ahead.

"What was his name?" the Ladder boss demanded.

KEMP'S hesitation passed for an effort at remembering. "Smith. Or Jones. I forget which one he used most. But he mentioned you; and when I had to get out of Wyoming fast I thought there wouldn't be any harm looking you up. I'd sort of like to get me a steady job where I could keep off the roads for awhile."

"There ain't any easy jobs on the Ladder. You work hard, ride hard, and keep your iron handy and your mouth shut. Light down if you want to, though."

In dead silence, Kemp swung down from his saddle. He knew Ivers wasn't completely satisfied even yet; was probably trying right now to figure out the identity of this "Smith" Kemp had invented. But he also knew that he wouldn't have had this much of an offer if he hadn't made up the Wyoming story. The call board in the Trail Dust was a blind, of course. The Ladder didn't recruit its men that way. . .

The glance that passed between Ivers and the puncher on the veranda railing hadn't escaped him, but he didn't know what it meant. The man eased to his feet and came catwalking down the steps as Kemp grounded his reins and started up. He had a face that was bland enough, but there was hardness and meanness piled up in the little wrinkles and lines about his mouth, and in his eyes.

On the bottom step, as he edged past Kemp, he suddenly stumbled and went to one knee in the path. He came up quickly, shoulders hunched, faked fury in his face. "Tripped me, you skunk!" he snarled.

It was so preposterous that Kemp wanted to laugh. He'd credited Ivers with the imagination to think up something better than this. But he didn't laugh, because this was a test for him and too much depended on it. Instead, he said briefly the words they wanted him to: "Of course, I never tripped you. I reckon you know it."

"You calling me a liar?" A heavy fist arced over, smashing against Kemp's body.

Half-prepared though he was, the

blow caught him off-balance and put him sprawling on the steps. He was up quickly, circling out into the clear to meet his opponent. The other came boring in. Kemp landed a punch against his face, but it didn't stop him. He was about Kemp's size, but chunkily built, and there was a driving power behind his fists that he knew was there and knew how to use. At once, the stranger found himself giving ground before the onslaught, his head ringing under the battering.

Up on the veranda, Ferd Ivers was watching coldly, uninterestedly, Kemp's initiation. For that was what it amounted to, of course. It was one of the ways recruits were weeded out for the Ladder's manbreak outfit. Later there'd be other trials, other testings; and Bill Kemp would have to weather them all, if the life that depended on him was to be saved. He'd have to take them all in his stride.

Determination flooded him and cleared the momentary shadows from his head. He wasn't giving ground now. He absorbed the punishment that rained on him, and came in to receive it, with his own fists driving.

He saw surprise flit across the features of his opponent. He gave point to it with a jab that brought blood to the other's mouth. The dust of the path churned up in choking clouds. His trail-weary body screaming for rest, Kemp plunged in and a gasp broke from the other's bleeding lips, as a fist rammed wrist-deep into the hard muscle of his belly. A blow landing behind the ear staggered Kemp for a second; but he caught himself and hammered back, and suddenly his fists were chopping at empty air.

THE man lay sprawled on the earth. Kemp backed off and waited, the tingle of the blows still running up his arms. The other groaned, rolled slowly to a half-sitting position. Blood smeared his face, and when he turned it to glare up at Kemp the hatred that distorted it was no mere faked emotion. He was not play-acting now.

He raised an arm, shakily, ran fingers through matted hair. Then suddenly that arm was a wiry spring, flicking back and out again. The instinct to duck operated almost too slowly to save Kemp's life; yet he just managed to throw himself to one side as the flicking blade streaked past him. The knife thudded harmlessly to earth somewhere behind him. Almost before the sound of its landing came, Kemp's sixshooter was in his hand and trained level at the man who'd tried to kill him.

"If you ever do that again—" he began, tightly; then Ferd Ivers, speaking from the rail, cut him off.

"Enough of that!" the Ladder boss snapped. "Rawls, take your sticker and get out of here until you've had time to cool off" And to Kemp, as the knifer got scowling to his feet: "Put your iron back. There's no time for squabbles for anybody workin' on the Ladder."

Still seething inwardly at Rawls' cowardly attack, Kemp dropped the sixshooter into its leather sheath. He mustn't let his anger blind him to his main purpose. And from Ivers' words, he knew that he had passed the first manbreak test. For the moment, at least, he'd been accepted here at the Ladder.

"What did you say your name was?" Ivers demanded.

"I didn't," Kemp said, briefly. "I told you I was from Wyoming, though. That's good enough."

The other's dark glance was on him, running over the length of his lean frame, probing at him. His next words gave Kemp a start. "I got a feeling I seen you before, somewhere. Within the year. Something mighty familiar

about you—"

Kemp shook his head, hiding his momentary consternation. "Hunh-uh," he said flatly. "I don't think so. I don't think you and I have been to any of the same places."

Ivers hesitated another moment, still uncertain. Then he shrugged. "All right—Wyoming. Top wages on the Ladder. Eighty a month—and you bet you earn it! Find an empty in the bunkhouse and drop your traps."

The bunkhouse was a low adobe building with a shake roof, and an interior dark after the hot blast of the day. It was empty, but the scent of men hung in the still air, and there was little choice in finding himself a bunk that was unclaimed. Bill Kemp stowed his warbag under one in a far corner.

His body cried for rest, and he let himself down for a moment upon the hard wooden edge of the bunk. What should he do now? Get to the nearest telegraph office, maybe. No; he hadn't enough facts—only suspicions that to him were sure, but that he couldn't yet show to anyone else. And there was another matter still to be settled: the man who wore green. Unless he entered into the picture somewhere, there couldn't be any proof that Kemp's glance at that call board back in the Trail Dust had found him pay dirt, and not just another worthless strike.

"Take your time!" he muttered to himself and to the dust motes the late afternoon sun showed in the room. "You can't take any chance of acting before you're ready. Too much depends on it!"

But then he remembered that the time was already short, so short that he found himself battling down a sudden touch of panic.

Sunset was only a few minutes away as he went out again into the ranch yard; the trees around the house dragged long shadows over the earth. Kemp walked toward the veranda, where his bronc still waited, hip shot, reins trailing. Another horse, lathered with riding, had been left near it; Kemp hadn't heard it come into the yard. He took the reins of his own bronc in his hand, to lead it over to the corral; but at that moment the door of the house swung open, and two men came out.

One was Ferd Ivers. The other was a man who wore a pale green shirt, a green neck-cloth, and even a green band around his light brown sombrero.

CHAPTER II

Death Lies Below

SEEING these two, together, was the final proof that he needed. He had not been mistaken. And now if he played wisely the cards that had been dealt him—

Ivers saw him, as the rancher came down the steps with the other at his heels. "Don't unsaddle!" he ordered, crisply. "You're ridin' in a minute."

"Wait!" That was his companion, who was studying Kemp suspiciously with narrowed eyes set in a lean, sallow face. "Is this the new man?" And when Ivers nodded: "Are you sure we want to take him along on this job?"

The Ladder boss said, "Why not? It's the quickest way to find out if he's gonna make a hand."

The other shrugged, but there was still suspicion in the look he gave Kemp. Ivers said, "Wyoming, this is Tug Payton—my foreman. You take orders from him."

Kemp nodded shortly, touching the brim of his hat, and then stood with the reins of his bronc in his hands, waiting, and wondering what was afoot. Great activity had broken out suddenly at the Ladder—horses being saddled,

and men coming from the buildings buckling gunbelts in place. They were all of a type; hard, sharp-eyed. The knife-thrower, Rawls, was among them. He glared blackly at sight of Kemp, but the latter ignored him and swung astride his own mount. Presently Ivers came up forking a heavy-barreled black and shouting orders; and with Payton on a fresh bronc falling in beside him, he led the Ladder crew thundering out of the yard.

Few words were spoken, no hint given of where they were headed or why. But though they rode without haste, there was a grim purpose in this manbreak crew that told of trouble—dark trouble ahead for someone.

The dust their broncs churned up was touched to gold by the setting sun. They skirted a small herd of cattle bearing the Ladder burn, cut through timbered swells where night was already gathering. Ahead, in the east, the scarps of the eroded valley wall were rose-colored, then smoky and dimming out as the light faded.

The cavalcade rode out of the timber, finally, and there—seemingly at the foot of the rim—a square of lamp-light marked the shadows. Without any word from Ivers, they all pulled up for a moment and stared at it while their horses blew in the gray dusk. "Just like I told you," Tug Payton said. "They're all down there. See the broncs?"

Enough of the daylight was left for that. Bill Kemp saw the knot of four saddlers tied up at the porch of the little house. The place did not amount to much. There were a few acres under cultivation, the fence lines and strands of wire dimly visible. The house itself was no more than a shack, cheaply thrown together. In this half-light the whole layout looked poverty stricken and hopeless.

"Who's on hand?" Ferd Ivers demanded.

"Collison and Mills and Steiner," his foreman answered. "And Hardesty, of course. I dunno who else. But I understand they been plannin' big on this powwow. They're talkin' war."

Ivers grunted, shortly. "We'll stop that sort of thing right now," he said. "Come on!"

In a sudden, threatening tide the Ladder crew swept down upon the homestead. Bill Kemp, riding with them, felt sharp apprehension at the thought of what might be building here; yet he could only keep his place in the ranks of Ivers' men and see what was to happen.

Now, abruptly, they were boiling about the shack, heels chopping the earth as they swung from saddles. The door slammed open, silhouetting a figure against the lamplight; but Ferd Ivers was already at the threshold and he shoved the man back into the house and pressed in with his crew behind him.

THEY fanned out as they came through the door, some dragging guns. The occupants of the room stood where they were, staring, helpless, and in a glance Bill Kemp read the quick fear that held those wide and startled eyes.

Only five men were there to meet Ivers' dozen—five men whose honest faces showed the worry and necessity that haunted them. The one Ivers had shoved roughly back from the door had caught his balance again with one hand against the shabby table where the lamp stood. He was an oldster with a fine shock of snow white hair and a frail body stiff now with anger.

"What's the meaning of this, Ferd Ivers?" he demanded.

The rancher stood there with his eyes working over the faces of the five. "I reckon you know well enough, Hardes-

ty," he grunted, shortly. And added: "All of you!"

"But you can't—"

Hardesty's protest was interrupted by the girl coming into the room. She shoved open a door leading to the kitchen and was well across the threshold, with a tray loaded with food in her hands, before she looked up and saw the intruders. She halted, staring at them.

She was mighty pretty, Kemp thought, but not the way some girls were who looked as though they'd break at a touch. There was plenty substantial about her. And from the resemblance he guessed she was the daughter of this old fellow Hardesty, who he already surmised was the one the barkeep had told him about.

After that first halt in the doorway, she came on into the room, with the eyes of all the men on her, and set her tray down on the table beside the lighted lamp. Then silently, as though she understood the situation, she went to Hardesty and put one arm protectingly around him.

"Now that we're all here," Ivers grunted, and went on. "I told you once, Hardesty, that I don't like squatters. I hate the stink of 'em. And I won't have 'em crowdin' me and tryin' to plot against me. You remember my sayin' that?"

Resentment leaped into the faces of all those worry-ridden men, and smoldered in the blue eyes of the girl. "I remember sayin' to you it was a free country," Hardesty muttered. "And a free range."

"Sure it's free—to them that can hold it!" Ivers retorted. "I reckon your squatter friends don't quite savvy yet that the Ladder outfit has changed hands," he went on, his words piling up in the taut silence of the room. "When you had it, they could move in and nobody said nothing. Well, I own it now. And you've switched over and become a damn dirt farmer yourself. That puts you on the same side with the rest of them. You and them against me!"

"I side with my friends," Hardesty told him quietly. "With them that took me in when the rustlers ruined me, and when I'd lost everything I had and went down for the count. They've helped me to get a second start now—and we're standin' together."

"That's what I figured. And I savvy the whyfor of this meetin' you were holding here tonight. Steiner—Collison—Walsh—" He went down the line, biting out the names of the farmers. "You've ganged up, have you? You think that all of you together can lick me?"

"We don't figure to lick anybody," Hardesty countered. "We just aim to hold our own and protect our rights to free ground. We're on our own land and we ain't ready to lie down and let you walk over us. That's why we're organizing—"

"Organizing!" Ivers grunted.

"And we aim to fight!" the old man finished.

With a sudden curse, Ivers waded forward, grabbed Hardesty and swung against his jaw with a blow that dropped him heavily to the floor. The old man huddled there, dazed, and the girl cried out and dropped to her knees beside him while a movement started among the other quartet of dirt farmers in the room. The menace of drawn guns ended that at once.

"You aim to fight, do you!" Ivers snarled. "All right, here's a sample of what you'll be buckin'." Quickly he turned and snatched up the lamp that stood on the table in the center of the shabby little room. His hand arced. The lamp crashed against the wall in a splatter of burning kerosene, and at once ravening flames began eating at the thin wooden boards.

THE girl's scream prodded Bill Kemp like a goad. He'd stood there in the ranks of the gunmen, holding himself in, telling himself over and over that it was not his battle and that he mustn't do anything to ruin his own plans. But this was too much! In a couple of strides he had shoved through the mob and whirled the Ladder boss around. He heard himself say: "You dirty stinking—"

And then the hard ramming of a gun muzzle against his back hauled him up. Ivers' face was wolfish in the growing flick of the firelight. "Buttin' in?" the rancher growled. "Well, I had an idea we couldn't use you, mister. This proves it."

Venomous with hate came the rasping voice of the knife-slinger, Rawls. "Let me carve him up a little, boss," he begged. "Just a little—"

"No!" grunted the Ladder boss. He nodded to Tug Payton, whose gun was in Kemp's back. "Take him out, Tug," he ordered. "We'll tend to him later!"

Stiff with anger at Ivers, and at himself for this blunder, Kemp let them herd him through the door. The five nesters and the girl were being brought out too, Joe Hardesty staggering and leaning on his daughter's shoulder. The Ladder gunmen weren't allowing them to do anything to put out that fire. They had to stand by and watch it take Hardesty's little shack.

"This is just a sample," Ivers said again, harshly. "Give me any more trouble, Hardesty, and the fences and crops go next. The same thing applies to the rest of you!"

Then, as quickly as they had come, the raiders were in saddle and away again, the burning house rapidly dwindling to a faint star on the black prairie behind them. The last thing Bill Kemp had seen of that dazed and helpless little knot of sod busters was the face of the girl; as he looked back her blue eyes had met his own for an instant, and the same angry scorn was in them that she had for the rest of the Ladder crew.

He tried to put the thought of her out of his head. He wanted to forget his hot anger at the thing he'd seen done back there tonight, because that was none of his business and his own position was precarious enough at the moment.

For now the Ladder crew was plunging its broncs to a halt and turning them, and Ivers and Tug Payton confronted Kemp. Ivers piled his hands on the saddle pommel and leaned his weight forward upon them, looking at him in the moonlight. "Well, mister," he said. "I take it you don't like the way we do business."

Kemp tried to make his shrug a casual one. "Everybody to his own methods, I reckon," he answered. "But yours just don't jibe with mine."

"Seems to me you started to call me a name, too," the Ladder boss went on. "Why don't you finish it? Go right ahead!"

Bill clamped his jaw. He didn't have any intention of repeating his rash words. But Ivers was waiting, and there was a dangerous silence for a moment. It was broken as Tug Payton thumbnailed a match to life, the snap of it startlingly loud. In the flicker of its light as the foreman touched off a quirly all their faces were hard and sinister. "Reckon he's forgotten," Payton grinned, the cigarette bobbing with the words. "Or scared to remember." He started to shake out the match, but then his hand paused and his eyes went wide.

"The brand on his horse!" he exclaimed. "Take a look at it, Ferd!"

Ivers did. It was apparently the first time he had given it attention, and he tauted in the saddle now as he saw it by the feeble matchlight. "Bar K!"

he muttered. And suddenly switched his glance back to Kemp's face. It was an evil look Bill saw in his eyes now. "Yeah, I thought I'd lamped you before," he said, ominously. "Or somebody that looked like you. You wouldn't have a brother or a cousin upstate a ways, now, would you? By the name of Jay Kemp—?"

The match burnt Payton's fingers and went out as he dropped it with a curse. And in that brief moment's diversion Bill was hauling back on the reins and clamping spurs to his bronc. The animal spun, rearing and pawing with its front feet, and when it dropped it was already a couple of hops away from the knot of horsemen.

HIS move caught them unprepared to stop him; and that was the only thing that gave him a chance. He heard the Ladder boss let out a roar, and the next moment guns were out and opening fire. Desperately Bill Kemp threw himself flat upon his horse's back and urged it forward with a prayer. Lead snarled in his ear. He couldn't return it because Tug Payton had taken his gun, back there in the burning house.

A bullet struck him and almost swept him from the saddle. But he held on, and now he was away. The gun crew strung out after him. That Bar K brand that had betrayed him, however, was the thing that saved him now; because one of his brother's Bar K broncs could outdistance anything else on legs.

He headed for the dark mass of the hills and the pursuit came pounding after him, guns spitting. Waves of blackness swept through his body from that slug that had found him. If he could only hang on. The ground was rising now. He swept over a hog-back and Ivers' crowd was lost from sight for an instant, but then they came pouring down from the crest. In the tangled shadows of the hollow they lost him, picked him up again as he skylined the next ridge against the moon.

Guns lashed out again. Kemp's bronc faltered in its stride, then caught it and went on. Kemp thought his heart would stop beating as he knew the animal was hit.

It began to look like the finish; in any event, he couldn't hold the saddle much longer, the way the strength was pouring out of him. And those behind were gaining now, as the injured pony lagged in its gallop through the hills.

Suddenly a black slash opened the ground just ahead of him and he had to haul reins to avoid plunging over the edge. Down, down below was the swollen rush of a mountain torrent, tumbling through darkness. Death waited there. And across that empty cut, the other rim of the canyon offered escape if his bronc could only make the leap. Could it? But it had to make it; for Kemp knew Ivers meant to kill him, now that the Ladder boss suspected who and what he was.

Kemp turned his bronc and rode back from the edge as far as he dared. The gun crew raced into view, almost upon him now. Guns spat at him. He pulled the animal around again, leaned forward to speak to it. Put in the spurs.

The bronc was game. It hit the edge of the slash, bunched legs and drove forward toward the other rim; hung in mid-air. Then the edge of the rock was underfoot, and the bronc took hold—slipped.

It clambered, wildly for an instant, legs flailing, shod hoofs scraping fire from the rimrock. But that bullet had drained away too much of its strength. It fell back. Dropped.

Kemp kicked free of the stirrups and empty space received him. He had time to think: "Sorry, Jay! I failed you!" And the slap of cold rushing

water hit him, tumbled him, sucked him down. He fought against it with the last of his bullet-drained strength, in mad, swirling, buffeting confusion that crashed and roared within his ears. Then consciousness was battered out of him and the blackness swept in.

CHAPTER III

A Gun to Back the Nesters

VOICES had replaced the crash of the waters, when he awoke. And there was daylight around him, and a softness that enveloped his body except for one tight streak of pain. He lay in this strange world, uncomprehending, until the softness resolved itself into a bed and the tightness became a bandage swathing much of his right side. He knew then that he was in a room in someone's house, and that he was very weak from the blood that must have drained out of him. But that was all he did know very clearly.

Those voices penetrated to him muffled by a closed door in between. Kemp listened to them idly, not taking in the meaning of the words, although he observed that one of those who were speaking must be very angry or excited from the way his speech carried. He was saying something about a house being burnt. Then the name of Ferd Ivers was mentioned, and Kemp came immediately alert.

Another voice said, patiently, "But Hardesty, Ferd tells me it was an accident. That one of you fellows tipped the lamp over and the place went up before anybody could stop it."

"Ivers is a blasted liar, sheriff!" retorted the angry voice, and Kemp knew it was Hardesty's. "I got witnesses—a half a dozen of them that'll prove how it happened."

"So has Ivers," the sheriff said. "Every one of his men back up his story. So it's just you against them, and I don't see where there's anything I can do."

"You can arrest Ivers!" Hardesty retorted. "Only you won't! I can see that, plain enough. Even if I swore out a warrant, you'd lose it or something. You've known me for years, Hogsett; but now this crook moves in and already you've sold out to him—to him and his gang of killers."

Kemp heard the sheriff sputtering in anger, something about not having come out here to be insulted; and then Hardesty's daughter was trying to put in a quieting word. Suddenly something shouted a warning into Kemp's thoughts. There was one thing he had to prevent. He threw back the covers and sat up on the edge of the bed. Weakness swept through him. He had to clutch at the bedpost to haul himself to his feet.

He had on a night shirt that didn't fit very well, and the bandage around his chest constricted his breathing. Staggering a little, he got to the door and leaned against the wall next to it for support. He opened the door a crack.

He looked into the living room of another farm house much like the one that had belonged to Joe Hardesty, though less poverty stricken and thrown together than that one. Probably it was the home of the lean, red-faced man who stood there at Hardesty's side with the girl between them. He was one of those who had been at the meeting Ivers' crew had interrupted.

The fourth person in the room—the sheriff, Hogsett—was big and bulky; though Kemp couldn't see him very well because the man's back was toward him. But past him, Kemp looked into the face of the girl and he saw that she had noticed him in the doorway.

Now she opened her mouth to speak, and Kemp knew suddenly that she was about to tell the sheriff about his presence in the house. That mustn't happen; word mustn't get to Ivers that he was alive, and here—

Kemp shook his head, pleading with his eyes for her to keep silent. She saw, and somehow understood. The words she had been about to say remained unspoken.

He closed the door and leaned against it then, battling against the weakness that suddenly poured through him. Distantly, he heard other hot words uttered, and presently the lawman was leaving; his heavy boots shook the walls as he tramped out of the house, and the door slammed after him.

At once, Hardesty's voice rose in fury. "That startotin' jellyfish!" he shouted. "You see how it is, Collison! You see what we can hope to get out of the law. . . No, don't try to talk to me, Sue! I know what I'm sayin'. It's use against the Ladder now, and law or no law we got to do our fightin' before Ivers burns us all out."

"You've spoke the truth, Joe." That was Collison. "I'm with you, and I know the rest are too. There's no use waitin' any longer—"

THE voices faded out abruptly, as Kemp's unconscious body slid down the wall to the uncarpeted floor. For a long time he knew nothing; when he awoke again a heavy silence had fallen over the house. It seemed to him like midafternoon, but whether it was the same day or not he couldn't tell. But when he pushed up to one elbow, he found that he was much stronger than before and there was less of the dizziness when he moved.

He had been got back into the same bed, in the same room. He listened a moment, and heard no sound—but then there was a sob, very near at hand. He turned quickly and saw the girl where he had failed to notice her before, standing at the sun-bright window; at the same moment some noise that he made must have reached her, for she turned and faced him and he saw the tears in her eyes.

"Hello," he said, a little lamely. He was thinking how pretty she was, even crying like this. And there was one matter he had to straighten out. He said: "You people fished me out of the creek and patched me up, I reckon. I needn't tell you I'm grateful. But why did you do that? You knew I was one of Ivers' men."

She shook her head. "We saw you try to interfere when he burnt us out night before last," she pointed out. "That told us you were different from the rest. And when Tom Collison found you caught in the brush at a gravel bar in the stream, unconscious, we knew it must have been Ivers that put the bullet along your ribs. We couldn't do less than try and help you."

"Collison," he repeated. "He owns this place?"

"Yes. He took us in when ours burned. Otherwise, I don't know what we'd have done. And now—"

She was crying again as she turned away. Kemp asked sharply: "What is it, Miss Hardesty?"

"The sheriff was here this morning," she told him. "Though of course you know that. Dad had been hoping he'd do something to protect our rights, but when he wouldn't—Dad and Collison are gone now, to make trouble. They've ridden to gather the other farmers. They're determined to make a fight of it. All of them against Ivers—"

Kemp sat up abruptly. His face was hard. "When did they leave?" he demanded.

"A couple of hours ago. I couldn't stop them. And I had to stay here with you."

"Bring my clothes!" Kemp ordered. "I gotta get up from here pronto!"

She only stared at him.

"There's gonna be bloodshed," he insisted, "and maybe I'm the only one can stop it. Because I've got the information that will hang Ferd Ivers—if I use it right!"

"What do you mean?"

He shook his head impatiently. "No time to talk about it now; maybe I'm already too late to head off the slaughter your dad and Collison are out to start. Get my clothes for me, quick!"

Driven by his commands and the urgency of his tone, she ran and brought them. "But you shouldn't try to get up—" she exclaimed.

"Never felt better," he cut her off, impatiently. "Now find me a gun. And while I'm gettin' into these go saddle a horse for me—if you know how."

"I've been riding since I was three!" she retorted, indignantly; but there was a new hope shining in her eyes as she hastened away to do as he had bid.

Kemp wasn't at all as sure of himself. As he climbed out of the bed and started to pull on his clothes, another attack of the dizziness gripped him. He had been badly battered by that raging current before it lodged him in the gravel bar growth. He had suffered from exposure, and from the angry bullet groove along his side. But grimly determined, he dressed and buckled on the belt and gun that Sue Hardesty had left for him on a table in the other room. The revolver he checked briefly to make sures it was in working order.

HE WAS suddenly weak from loss of food. In the kitchen a pot of coffee was boiling; he found a cup and poured the scalding liquid into him without cream or sugar. It helped considerably.

Then he went outside and found that the girl had a bronc already saddled for him and another for herself. "I can't sit around here doing nothing," she explained quickly, over his protest. "And I know the men dad intended to see. Maybe I can help you find him."

He saw the common sense of that. He would have helped her to mount then, but she laughed at his offer and stepped up into the saddle more quickly and lightly than he could have done it. She wore a split riding skirt and a yellow blouse that the breeze moulded to her figure. Kemp thought again that Joe Hardesty had a mighty attractive daughter.

"We'll try the Lew Meyer place first," she said. "That's closest, on the road to town."

. . . They knew, even before Lew Meyer's wife came hurrying out of the little sod shack, that the men had been here. The trampled earth before the door told where a number of mounted horses had come and stood and stomped and then galloped on again.

"There was a lot of them," the farm woman told them, pushing back the hair from her frightened face. "They rode up half an hour ago—almost all the farmers. Your dad called Lew out and they talked to him a few minutes, and then Lew came in and got his rifle and kissed me goodbye and rode off with them without saying a word. I never saw him look so—hard and strange."

"Which way did they head?" Kemp asked her, crisply; and when she pointed down the road: "I guess they came here last. That means they've gone into town."

They spent a moment trying to reassure the worried woman, and then they were back upon the road. Bill Kemp pressed the mounts. He had a feeling that things might already be out of control; that he hadn't any time to spare.

A rider whose bronc trailed a plume

of dust went flashing across the flats, as the last hill rolled behind and the buildings came in view.

Kemp hauled up for a moment to watch him go with narrowed, speculative eyes. That hombre was in a rush, and the direction he was headed for looked like a short cut to the Ladder headquarters.

Now they were coming down into the town, and ever more aware of excitement boiling through its streets. Bill Kemp stopped a man who was hurrying along the wooden plank walk. "What's up?" he demanded.

"Looks like a battle," the other said. "The nesters have got Ferd Ivers and one or two of his boys cornered over at the Trail Dust, and they say they're gonna wipe 'em out."

"Where's the sheriff?"

"Hogsett?" the man grunted. "I reckon he's hidin', down at his office. He come around and started talkin' big to the farmers about stringin' them all up, but they wasn't in a mood to listen. They chased him off the street with a couple of slugs through his hat. Seems like—"

Kemp hauled his bronc away. "Come on!" he said to Sue Hardesty, grimly.

At the corner, Main Street opened wide and dusty ahead of them, with the big Trail Dust saloon opposite. Deathly quiet hung over the place, and the street and the sidewalks were empty in the blasting heat of the sun—empty except for Joe Hardesty and the other nesters who were with him.

They had the saloon ringed in, with a thin circle of men posted in any kind of natural protection they could possibly find.

Kemp saw the gleam of a rifle in the shadows under the feed store's wooden awning, the top of a head showing behind a water trough across the street. "Hardesty!" he called, loudly.

CHAPTER IV

Showdown at Trail's End

THEN he saw the oldster, and a couple of others with him. They stepped out into the open, waving at him and the girl to go back.

"What's come over you?" Kemp demanded. "You trying to commit suicide, or land yourselves in the pen, or what?"

"The Lord's given us this chance to get rid of our enemies," old Hardesty declared, his voice triumphant across the heated stillness. "They're in that building, alone—Ivers, and Tug Payton, without their killer crew to back them up. And we're going to finish them now!"

Sue Hardesty cried: "Dad! This won't do any good. You've got to stop it!"

From one of the hidden men downstreet a rifle lashed out, and the bullet streaked past within a foot of Kemp and the girl. Quickly, Kemp grabbed the bridle of her horse and wheeling his own mount pulled her back into the side street.

"They've gone a little batty," he said. "All of them. Talkin's no good now."

"But what can we do?" she demanded, her pretty eyes clouded. "Up to this it's been Ivers that's broken the law; and he could get away with it. But not them. Not the way the law is run here—"

"Where's the sheriff's office?" Kemp demanded suddenly. "It's the only chance!"

He found Hogsett prowling up and down the cluttered office in a frenzy of worry, and hauling out his watch every minute or so to squint at it anxiously. The sheriff whirled abruptly as he heard someone in the door, and stood there glaring at Kemp and at the gun

the latter held carelessly in his hand.

"Don't you know there's trouble up the street, Hogsett?" Kemp asked him, mildly. "Why aren't you there stoppin' it? Or," he added, "are you waitin' until that rider you sent gets back with the gun crew from the Ladder?"

From the way the big man began to sputter and his face to crimson, Kemp knew he'd guessed right. "Bringin' in killers to rod the law!" he grunted coldly. "Well, that means we'll just have to work quick before th[illegible] get here."

"We?" the sheriff echoed.

"You and me are the ones that can end this mess without any blood bein' spilled—maybe." The gun tightened in his fist, the point of it whipping into line. "Come on, boy! You're comin' with me. And for once in your life you're gonna try to act like that star on your shirt belongs there!"

Hogsett hunched his shoulders. "Whoever the hell you are—" he began. But Kemp's gun decided him not to finish that statement.

He didn't say anything again until they paused at the intersection with Main Street and the saloon before them. Nothing had changed. Those within had barricaded themselves, and the nesters outside were not yet ready to make a charge that they knew would be fatal to some of them. At any moment they might reach that point. At any moment, too, the gunslingers from the Ladder might come boiling into town with their lead spitting, and start the blood flowing like water in the dusty street. . .

"We're goin' inside," Kemp told the officer, quietly.

The sheriff turned a scared face toward him. "Those lunatics out there will kill us!" he exclaimed.

"No they won't," Kemp shook his head. "One of them took a shot at old Hardesty's daughter a minute ago, and that's probably sobered them up some. I don't think any of them are crazy enough to plug a lawman—though Ferd Ivers might try it."

"Ivers is a friend of mine," the sheriff claimed, stoutly.

"He's a crook and a murderer," Kemp retorted. "That's what we're goin' in there to prove."

Hogsett looked at him, levelly. "A murderer! Do you know what you're saying?"

Kemp nodded. "The proof is inside—right there in the barroom. Evidence that'll fly him like a kite."

For a long moment the pair crossed glances. Then the sheriff's appearance seemed to change. A new set came to his jaw. He said: "We'll go in!"

THEY walked side by side straight through the blast of the afternoon heat, directly across the open street toward the door of the saloon. An ominous murmur went up from the besieging nesters, threatening. Kemp, pacing the big man at his elbow, tried to keep nerves steady as under the shading brim of his hat he glimpsed the faces and the glint of gunmetal up and down the street. He could feel the weight of all those angry eyes upon him, and half waited for one of the rifles to click, for a bullet to find its lodging in his unprotected back. . .

He thought of Sue Hardesty, and wondered if she were watching somewhere, her blue eyes also upon him. . .

Then slowly, deliberately, the pair of them were stepping up to the gallery of the Trail Dust. No bullet yet had been unleashed at them. Guns still in their holsters, they shouldered the batwings.

"Ivers!" the sheriff called, as they pushed through. "This is Hogsett. I'm comin' in. I got someone here wants to talk to you—"

Kemp's eyes battled the dimness of

the big, cool room. He saw the aproned tender behind the bar, busy taking down all the ranked display of bottles and glasses. His glance shuttled on, took in the pair who sat at a gaming table in the center of the room, facing the door, with guns and ammunition laid out on the green baize top before them. Ferd Ivers, and green-shirted Tug Payton.

Now, as the batwings fanned shut again, they recognized the man who was with the sheriff, and with one accord came lunging to their feet. "You!" Ivers exploded.

Kemp nodded, and his hand was on the butt of his gun. "That's right," he said. "Me. And keep away from that collection on the table.

"Didn't expect we'd meet again, did you?" Kemp went on. "Neither did I, just about the time I was falling into the river a couple of nights ago. But there are a few things I had to tell the sheriff here, so I came back. It won't take long." He turned to the barkeep, who was staring at them all with face white from fear. "That sign there on the call board, about needin' help at the Ladder," he said. "Ferd Ivers wrote that up there himself, didn't he?"

The barkeep nodded.

"Look at it, Hogsett," Kemp told the sheriff. "What's wrong with it?"

The sheriff frowned as he eyed the message printed in chalk upon the blackboard. He said: "There's somethin' about the shape of the letters. The E's—"

"They're all backwards," Kemp finished for him. "That's the way Ivers writes. That's the way they looked in a note he wrote to the sheriff at Sandoval, a few months ago, tellin' him a fellow named Jay Kemp was the one who robbed the bank up there, and killed the banker.

"Ivers and his foreman here was the ones who really did that job, sheriff," Kemp went on. "The way I figure it, they'd probably been down here with their gang, rustling Joe Hardesty's cattle and getting him into a crack until finally they heard he was ready to sell out the Ladder for next to nothin'. Needin' the cash for that, they drifted up to Sandoval, found out the bank was full, and broke it open. They had to kill to do it. Then, just to drag a good fat herring over the trail, they left that anonymous note at the sheriff's office and planted part of the loot at Jay Kemp's place, the Bar K horse ranch up there.

"Jay Kemp is my brother, sheriff. I was out of the state at the time, workin' for an outfit over in Colorado, and it was months before I heard about it—that he'd been convicted on the basis of that loot found on his ranch. I hurried back, but there was nothin' much I could do. Jay's only alibi was that a couple of strangers had ridden by the ranch some time during the night that the bank was robbed, and though he gave a good description of them no one had seen them or knew anything about them. But it was the only chance. If they could be found maybe they'd testify that Jay was home that evening. I set out on their trail, and for over a month I've been lookin'."

KEMP pointed at the call board. "I was about to give up when I saw that sign; and right then I guessed that those two strangers were the very ones who wrote the letter to the sheriff. That they robbed the bank themselves, and had just finished planting some of the loot at my brother's place when he saw them. To top it off, Ivers and Payton here fit the description Jay gave me—right down to the color of their clothes!"

Ferd Ivers' face was black with anger, but the sheriff was looking at him with a new courage in his own manner.

"What do you say to this, Ferd?" the officer demanded.

"It's a lot of wild talk," the Ladder boss snorted, "that'll never be made good. For one thing, you can't prove I wrote that note; and even if you did, Tug and I would swear the Kemp hombre was acting mighty queer the night we rode by, and that we saw blood on his hands and a winded Bar K hoss hidden in the trees near the house. We just got suspicious and thought we'd better give the law a hint. But bein' in a hurry and not wantin' to get roped in as witnesses in no trial, we didn't feel like givin' our own names. That's all. And that'll be our story, sheriff!"

Suddenly, then, Kemp saw his case toppling like a card structure. It would make a plausible yarn, at that, and it would be backed in court by two voices, against his brother's lone denial.

He staked all on one final bluff. "You're forgettin'," he said, slowly. "Or maybe you didn't know. There was one other piece of evidence found at the bank. A green bandanna—"

Tug Payton's face went white and involuntarily he reached to fumble at the green cloth around his throat. He turned to his boss, stammering: "I didn't know it, Ferd! I didn't know I lost—"

Ferd Ivers whirled on him in fury. "Shut up, you damn fool!" he exploded. "That was a lie—to trap us!"

It was too late; the truth was out. They both knew it, and with one motion they dived for the guns that were on the table. The slow-moving sheriff yelled and tried to drag out his holstered weapon, but only Kemp was ready for this. The gun Sue Hardesty had given him came into his fingers and roared. He saw Tug Payton leap backward, convulsively, his own weapon falling from his hand as the slug tore into him. A red stain crawled over the green of his shirt, and he toppled.

Ferd Ivers had his gun and dropped to one knee behind the table, firing over the edge of it at Kemp. The bullet was thrown too hastily to be true, and it missed by inches. Lead from Kemp's gun dug a furrow in the table top. Then both weapons spoke again, at the same instant.

Ivers screamed horribly, dropped his gun and clutched both hands to his face. He fell forward across the table, his bloody fingers scraping a smear across its surface, his bloody head dropping upon it lifeless.

Kemp said, quietly: "You'll send a telegram right away, won't you, sheriff? To the governor? They're supposed to hang Jay tomorrow evenin'. . . ."

Suddenly, now that the crisis was past, the strength ran out of him, and it was only the wall at his back that held him up as the bullet streak in his side took its toll. He hardly knew when the men from the street came pouring into the smoke-filled room.

THEY were helping him into a chair. He thought suddenly of Ivers' gun crew, that would be hitting town any minute now; he'd have to be ready to add his gun to those of the nesters. But a gentle hand held him back, and he thought: the heck with it. When that knife-throwing snake of a Rawls and the others learned that their boss was dead, they wouldn't put up a fight. They'd streak it out of the country before the hatred of the honest men descended on them.

Then he saw the face of the one who was leaning over him, half crying and smiling at the same time. It was the girl—Joe Hardesty's daughter. That she could smile made everything seem right again, somehow. Looking at her, Bill Kemp found himself smiling too—a little wearily, maybe, but with the satisfaction of a trail that was ended, and a job well done.

WHEN THE JACKSON CLAN FIGHTS

By JAMES SHAFFER

Old Whip Jackson made his own law, and saw that it was enforced, and folks knew he was dead serious when he spoke of smashing his own son-in-law if the kid didn't crawfish to him pronto!

OLD WHIP JACKSON and his three sons rode home that midday to find Black Joe Gaff bandaging a bullet torn leg. Old Whip didn't ask questions. The Crooked J was an outfit that first took care of its own—after that it took retribution.

Old Whip's three sons, Ed, Frank and Pete, got hot water boiling, bandages ready, and a bottle of whiskey as an anaesthetic. Old Whip dug the bullet out and expertly stopped the bleeding. Black Joe took a long pull from the bottle.

"Chris Hardy rode in this morning," he talked as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "He put a rifle slug in my leg and then rode off with Little Davey."

Fiery red mounted to Old Whip's face as he stared at his wounded foreman. Black Joe slanted a long look at his boss and took another quick one from the bottle. "Said he was gonna get what was coming to him from the Crooked J." And that remark brought to everyone's mind the same thing. The Crooked J had lost a dozen thoroughbred horses a week previous. Father and sons had been out that morning, trying to cut sign.

Silence hung heavy in the big room of the ranch house—a house that hadn't known a woman's touch for these twenty long years. A silence that built up as Old Whip's anger mounted. Then the words came.

"Snag a fresh bronc, each of you," he addressed his sons. "And Ed, make sure you got a rope that won't break." He turned toward the gun rack on the wall, picking a Winchester. "It's high time I hung myself a son-in-law."

The older brothers, Ed and Frank, nodded and moved toward the door. They had their father's build; big, rangy and a mop of wild black hair that wouldn't tame any better than their nature. Pete, the youngest, was different. Pete had a lot of his mother's ways about him. And he was like their sister, Molly, had been. But Pete was also a Jackson, which meant that he didn't hang back, now that he knew he'd have to make his play.

"Chris Hardy only did what any man would do," Pete snapped. "He took Little Davey home. After all, he's his father. And the kid ain't liked it here. He's been homesick as hell. And as for the horses—if he took 'em, maybe they'll repay Chris for what we done to him."

Old Whip's lean frame drew taut as he stared at his youngest son. This was unheard of—Whip's sons were wild and rough—but Whip had taught them obedience to their father. "You telling me what I ought to do and not do, Pete!" His words roared out like thunder rolling against the mountains. "First it was Molly—marrying that dam sodbuster—and you're taking up for him!"

But Pete wasn't backing down. "Molly married Chris because she loved him," he said, throwing a long flat stare at Black Joe Gaffer. The foreman flushed and tilted the whiskey bottle again. "And I reckon," Pete went on, "that the happiest years she ever had was while she was Chris' wife — and watching Little Davey grow up."

Old Whip's eyes flashed fury. This was the Whip Jackson that had come to this country years ago when it was wild; who'd broken the country to suit himself, and had forced it to yield up a good living. He'd made his own law, and saw that it was enforced, and Pete knew he wasn't kidding when he spoke of hanging Chris Hardy, his own son-in-law and father of Old Whip's only grandchild—so far.

"If she'da married a good honest cowman she wouldn't have been worked to death before she passed twenty-five!" Whip snapped.

"That's a lie and you know it!" Pete retorted promptly. "She got wore out pulling Little Davey through a sick spell, and then came down with pneumonia."

"I'm through arguing," Whip yelled, and Pete knew he was telling the truth. Words had failed, as they always had, to stop him, and now the only thing Pete could do was to try to help Chris. He stuck his foot behind Frank and pushed. His brother floundered into Ed and they both went down. Old Whip yelled and started for Pete, and Pete tripped him, too.

He sprang for the door, jerked it open and slammed it shut after him. The door had an iron strap looped in the shape of a handle. Pete snatched up Frank's quirt on the porch and slipped it through the door handle, so the quirt end rested against the door jamb. The door opened inward—the improvised lock might slow them down for a minute. He sprinted for the corral.

His lock didn't hold for long—for the simple reason that Old Whip smashed the glass out of the window with his pistol butt and started crawling through. But Pete's head start was enough. He let down the corral bars, dabbed a loop over his rangy black, and shooed the rest out of the open gate with his saddle blanket. He snatched his saddle and bridle from the top rail, mounted bareback and galloped off. A couple of miles from the ranch, he took precious minutes to halt and clamp the saddle on. Then he rode.

CHRIS HARDY'S farm was eighty-five miles away—in Shoshone Valley. They had law in Shoshone Valley, Pete was thinking, and while Old Whip did as he damn pleased here in the mountains, he wouldn't try bucking the law outside his own stamping grounds. He'd tried it once—about a year ago, after Molly had died. Old Whip, Black Joe, Ed and Frank, had paid Chris a visit. They'd burned his house down, and brought Little Davey, seven years old, home with them.

And the law had gotten right on Old Whip for that sortie. He'd gotten out of it—mostly because Chris had been alone at the time, and some of Whip's friends had lied and given him an alibi. But Whip wouldn't visit Shoshone Valley again—of that Pete was sure.

So the thing to do was overtake Chris, and then make sure they stayed well ahead of the grim bunch on their backtrail. Miles down the trail, he pulled the black to a halt and studied sign. What he saw wasn't encouraging.

Chris and Little Davey were taking their time. The hoofprints of their horses showed that. Pete spurred on, and about an hour later saw a thin spiral of smoke lifting lazily above the tops of the pines ahead. He galloped into a small clearing by a stream, and found Chris standing by a small fire, a

cocked six gun in his hand.

"A lot of good that would do you," Pete said, remembering how poorly Chris handled a short gun. He cursed softly in annoyance as he noted that Chris had made preparations to camp for the night here. "Where's Davey?"

"He's crazy about fishing," Chris said. "I let him go up the crick a ways —and I'm building a fire to cook his catch."

Pete cursed louder. "Dad and the rest are right behind. We've got to ride, man, to stay ahead of them!"

"I ain't riding nowhere," Chris said grimly. "The sheriff over in the Valley told me if I had any trouble bringing Davey home to let him know—then *he'd* come over."

"Dad ain't figuring on you gitting home," Pete said significantly, and then blurted. "He's figuring on hanging you."

"He wouldn't try that!" Chris said quickly. "There's some things that's too raw for even Whip Jackson to get away with."

Pete had been doing some thinking on his ride, and the sum total of it was that his dad *would* hang Chris. And if there was any trouble, Whip could claim that Chris had tried to kill Black Joe Gaffer, and also had stolen those horses. Not that Pete blamed Chris for taking the horses—what those thoroughbreds brought would just about pay for his burned house—but this was still cow country—and horse thieves still stretched rope. But he didn't mention the horses.

"Mebbeso," he said. "And dad probably wouldn't try it—except for what happened to Black Joe Gaffer. Course, I know there ain't no love lost between you two—on account of Molly. Don't care much for him myself. but bushwhacking him with your rifle will give dad the excuse he needs."

Chris looked at Pete in quick surprise. "What you talking about—I didn't shoot Black Joe."

"Ain't no use lying to me," Pete said. "Dad hates nesters, and he ain't never got over Molly marrying you. But I ain't got no quarrel with you—I'm trying to help."

"I tell you I didn't shoot Black Joe. Yeah, I'll admit I throwed a gun on him." His lip curled. "He's supposed to be so damn tough. He shore showed yellow then. And now that you mention it, there was a shot as I was leaving—figured it might be Joe taking a long shot—but we were out of range."

"Let's get going!" Pete exploded. "First thing you know dad'll be here—"

"He's already here," Old Whip Jackson broke in. Pete whirled. His dad was stepping into the clearing, his cedar handled Colt trained on Chris. "You overlooked one bet, Pete," he yelled. "Black Joe's horse was saddled 'round back—but I'll 'tend to you later. Right now—"

Pete heard the whir of movement behind him, as Chris started moving to throw Whip's aim off, saw Old Whip's gun flame redly in the gathering twilight. Pete whirled—Chris had dropped behind a boulder, grim, deadly determination hardening his features.

Pete had started out to keep peace in the family—it was the way his mother —and Molly would have wanted it. And it would make things easier for Little Davey, and Molly would have wanted that, too. But this wasn't peace. His own father and brother-in-law were lining their sights on one another. Pete moved toward the big rock where Chris was.

"Get out of the line of fire, son!" Old Whip roared, but Pete wasn't about to obey his father. He moved closer to where Chris was forted up.

"Take out running, Chris," Pete said. I'll keep myself between you and dad till you make the brush. It'll be

dark pretty soon and you can get away."

Chris' answer was hard and brittle. "You talk like Molly—always wanting me to sidestep trouble with Whip—that's the trouble now! If I'da bucked him long ago, he'da learned some respect for me."

PETE threw a desperate glance over his shoulder. Old Whip was moving across the clearing, on foot. And traveling with that measured tread of a gunslinger—putting his feet down evenly and softly—so that his walking wouldn't interfere with his aim.

"Old side, you young hellion!" Old Whip shouted again. "I'll 'tend to you when I get you home."

"Now! Chris—while you still got time—" Peter whirled around to his brother-in-law, and then stopped short. Chris was dragging his Colt, laying its squat, blue-steel barrel across the boulder. Chris was no gunslinger, but Pete realized that a man taking good aim couldn't miss at that range. And Chris' face was set in hard lines, with white spots around his lips.

"Stop right where you are, Whip," Chris yelled.

"What's going to make me?" the cattleman bawled out.

Pete broke in. "Can't you two fools see that you'll regret it if you pull a trigger?" He faced his dad. "Think Little Davey would ever care for his granddad if he knew his granddad killed his own father?"

Whip spat in disgust. "Don't want my grandson brought up by a horsethief—and if Hardy has him much longer, he's liable to pick up some of his thieving ways."

"I've taken a lot off you, Whip Jackson," Chris said, and his voice was low. "I've turned the other cheek to you more than once—mostly on Molly's account. But that's over now. By rights, you ought to be hung, 'cause the way you took Davey was plain kidnaping—not counting my house you burned down. That's all over now—you stop where you are, or I'll kill you."

"How?" Whip jeered derisively. "You couldn't hit the broad side of a barn with a six gun."

But Pete Jackson knew his father was wrong. Chris Hardy had his gun barrel resting on the boulder, and he was taking good aim—a man couldn't miss, like that. Chris Hardy sighed a curse—and Pete knew the time for arguing was over. There was no time to make a decision—but Pete didn't need any time. He flung himself at Chris, grabbing for his gun wrist, and striving to twist the snout of the .45 upward.

"Just like I thought!" Chris panted. "A dirty Jackson trick to take me without anybody getting hurt—"

"You're loco—like dad," Pete grunted. "A killing wouldn't settle this—hey—!"

Pete hadn't counted on Chris' work-hardened muscles. The young farmer reared to his feet, with Pete clinging to him like a leech. He got his gun arm free and was lining his sights. Old Whip was undecided—a hasty bullet from his gun could snuff out Pete's life.

But the whole thing was settled quickly when Frank Jackson stepped out of the brush right behind Pete and Chris as they struggled. Ed and Frank had circled the clearing. Frank whipped his gunbarrel down in a short, choppy stroke. Chris Hardy moaned once and went down.

Old Whip stalked up, holstering his gun. He threw one black look at his youngest son, then turned to Ed. "Git the rope." His fierce old eyes swept the clearing. "Where's Davey?"

Pete could have told him—he could have pointed out the spot where Little

Davey was. Because just before he'd dived at Chris, he'd caught a glimpse of Davey peeping out of the brush up the creek a ways. Now he swung a casual glance that way. Davey wasn't in sight.

"Where's Davey?" Old Whip thundered at Pete.

Thoughts were rioting in Pete's head. Davey didn't like his grandfather much —a fact which increased Whip's hatred for his father. Old Whip had been able to command obedience, but that was all. He hungered for companionship. And not liking Old Whip, Davey would probably stay hid for a while, Pete thought. He cut a glance over his shoulder. Ed was bringing the rope.

"Davey's gone on ahead," Pete lied, not knowing just what he was going to say next. But he had to gain time! Time to think of something.

"Yeah?" Whip demanded suspiciously. "How? Who with? And where'd he go?"

Where'd he go! That was it. Pete's mind snatched at the thought like a drowning man for a straw. The words rolled fast off his tongue. "I don't know. When I caught up with Chris Davey was gone. Chris figured I'd come for the boy—and told me he'd had a couple of men waiting here to take Davey some place."

"Where?" There was hot urgency in Whip's voice.

"That's what he wouldn't tell me," Pete played his trump card—and silently prayed that it would take the trick. "He seemed almighty tickled about it, though. Said he'd sent Davey off somewhere, and that even if you *did* catch him—you wouldn't get Davey back."

HE FELT the cold sweat popping out on him as he watched for the effect of the words on Old Whip. It was bluff —pure bluff. But it took hold.

"He did, huh?" Whip snorted. "Like hell I can't find Davey! Put the rope away, Ed. We'll postpone the necktie party till morning. I want to *talk* to Chris Hardy before he dances on air."

They caught Chris' horse and draped the young farmer over the saddle, tying him good so he wouldn't slide off. Pete looked at the ugly gash on his head where Frank's gun barrel had landed, and figured that Chris would be out a good long time.

Dusk was turning to swift darkness when they mounted for the ride back to the Crooked J. Pete swung the black in a complete circle, his eyes probing the darkening shadows of the brush surrounding the clearing. He caught a swift glimpse of a small white face peering out, and hastily motioned Little Davey to keep out of sight. He could think of some excuse to ride back this way and get Davey.

But it didn't work out that way.

Halfway home, he slapped at his holster, and cursed loudly. "Dropped my gun back there—better ride back and get it."

Old Whip was instantly suspicious. "You wouldn't be riding off to join Davey, now, would you," he said, half bantering, half grim. "Frank, you ride back with him."

"Let the fool thing lay there," Frank snapped. "I ain't had no supper yet—"

And Peter was willing to let it go at that.

Black Joe Gaffer had hobbled out on the porch, and greeted them from there as they rode in. Black Joe was wearing his guns, and a Winchester leaned against the porch railing.

"What you bringing the carcass home for?" he asked.

"He ain't dead yet," Old Whip said shortly.

"I've heard tell that some men go soft with age," Black Joe said carelessly. "Didn't figure Whip Jackson would, though."

The words stung the old cattleman.

"Why don't you keep your mouth out of other people's business?" he growled.

"That's enough out of *you*," his father snapped at him. "Heard all I want to from you, today. Ed, lock that," he jerked a thumb at Chris, "up in the blacksmith shop." He turned to Pete. "Don't git any ideas about pulling a sandy tonight and turning him loose. Frank, you're sleeping with him tonight."

Pete's heart sank. Frank was the lightest sleeper in the house. He scowled now at the idea.

Pete glanced at the rifle near Black Joe's chair, and the two guns around the foreman's waist. "You musta figured Chris would double back for another shot."

"Maybe," Black Joe grunted sourly, and would say no more. Pete went to bed wondering about Black Joe's guns —and the fact that Chris had denied shooting the foreman.

He lay in bed, his mind a seething riot. Old Whip's determination to hang Chris hadn't lessened. If he were to save him it would have to be tonight. He turned over on his side—and beside him, Frank stirred restlessly. And there was Little Davey, out there in the night somewhere. Somehow—before tomorrow he'd have to get those two together—and get them on the trail for home.

Cautiously, he slid a leg from under the covers, eased his weight to the edge of the bed. Then he put both feet on the floor—and Frank sat up.

"You're just making it hard on us both, Pete," his brother said. "Ain't no way of changing dad's mind—you ought to know that. I don't like this business of guarding you any more than you do. But—" He shrugged and lay back down.

Pete rolled a smoke and lit it. He smoked it in huge gulps, then cautiously began gathering the blanket around him. If he had to tie Frank up—

But downstairs, a door was opening. Pete listened. He heard Old Whip's bare feet padding down the hall, then he heard Little Davey talking! Pete lay real still. It was now or never—in just a few minutes Old Whip would know that he'd been lying—and with Davey back—

He slipped the blanket over Frank's head. His brother kicked and started to yell, but Pete jammed the pillow tight against his face.

"Sorry, Frank—but I'm just as determined as dad."

Pete swung himself out the window, and hung for a moment from the window sill. Then he pushed himself away from the house and let go.

STINGING needles shot through his feet as he hit, but he rolled to break his fall, then he was sprinting for the blacksmith shop. As the house dropped farther behind, he heard Old Whip's voice, growing louder with each word.

The blacksmith shop door was fastened with a heavy staple. "Chris! Chris—you—"

"Open the door."

"This way," Pete whispered. He swung the door open and led the way toward the corral. He'd keep his mouth shut about Little Davey being here, he thought. The main thing was to get Chris away. With desperate speed they saddled two horses, and at Pete's command, walked them slowly away from the ranch. But they had not gone far when an uproar broke loose at the house. That, Pete thought, would be Old Whip discovering his absence.

"Mount up," he told Chris. "We got some riding to do."

The night wore on, and they neared the clearing where Chris had camped. In the dim light, Pete could see the young farmer leaning forward in his

eagerness to get back to where he'd left Little Davey. And then they were galloping into the clearing. Chris lifted his voice.

"Davey! Come a-running. It's pop."

Pete shifted uneasily in his saddle as only brooding silence greeted Chris' call. The young farmer dismounted and struck a match to light up the camp, hoping to find Little Davey rolled up in his blankets asleep.

"He's around somewhere," Chris said, with assurance he did not feel. "Let's start up the creek."

"No use to hunt for him, Chris," Pete said. "Davey reached the Crooked J just a few minutes before we pulled out."

Quickly he related seeing Davey in the brush, and how he'd figured on coming back for the kid, and how Old Whip had scotched the idea.

Chris flung himself back into the saddle. "We'll go back for him."

"Don't be a fool!" Pete snapped. "Listen, here's my plan." In terse sentences he outlined his idea for shaking the pursuit and reaching Shoshone Valley. "We can bring the sheriff back with us after Little Davey."

"And have Old Whip jeer at me for calling in the law. Hell, no! That's the trouble now. I've never stood up to Whip. Davey's my kid, and if I ain't man enough to bring him home, I don't deserve to have him." He reined around. "You coming?"

Pete jerked his mount around in front of Chris. "No, and you ain't, either."

For a moment the two glared at each other, and the tension piled up between them.

The sound of hard running horses on their backtrail reached their ears. Old Whip hadn't been long in starting pursuit.

"It's now or never—if we're gonna ride," Pete said. Chris slid to the

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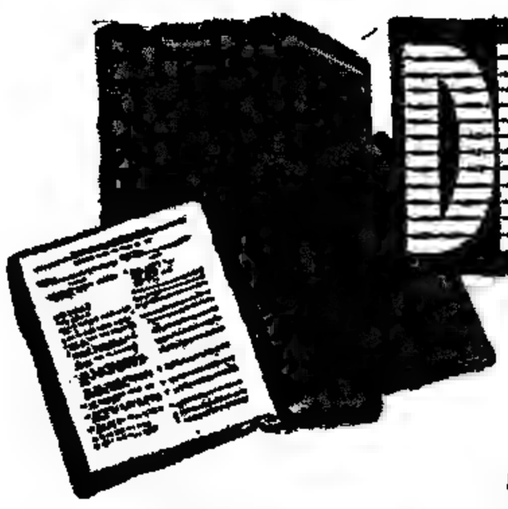

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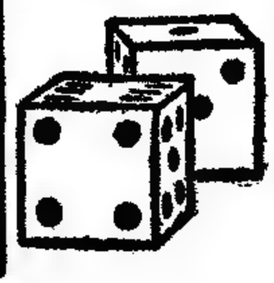

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ground.

"I'm making my stand right here."

"We'll gamble on it," Pete said. "Git over in the brush—out of the clearing. If they ride on by—we'll double back like you want it."

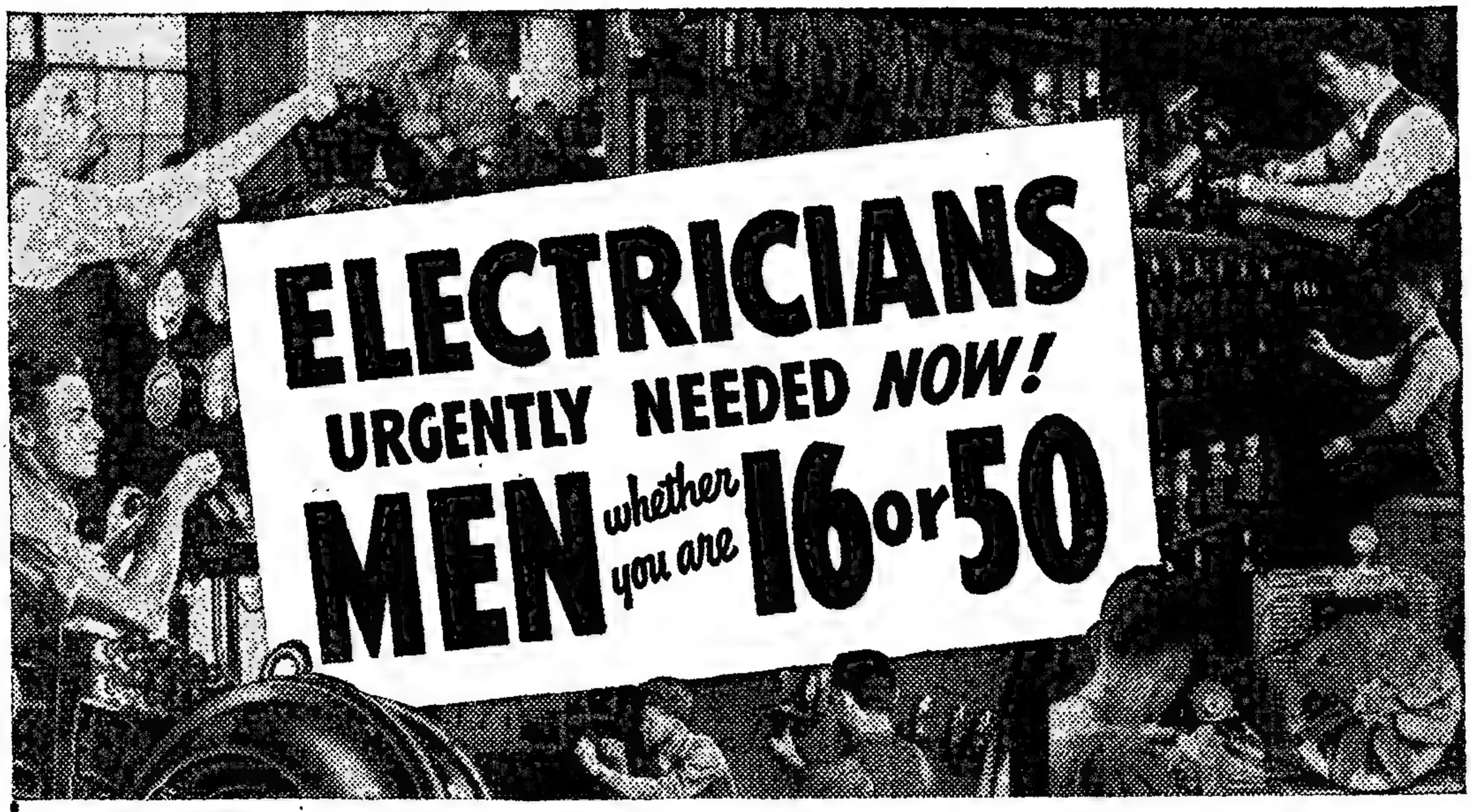
Chris nodded agreement, and they led their mounts out of the clearing until the tangle of brush and the dark shadows of the woods hid them from the trail. The horses were close now, and then, shortly, they could hear Old Whip's profanity over the clang of steel and shod hoofs on the rocky trail. Pete held his breath as three shadowy forms materialized out of the darkness of the trail, then swept across the clearing. Splashing water glinted faintly in the pale starlight as they forded the small creek almost without slowing down. The sound of the hoofbeats faded.

"I reckon we go back," Pete said bleakly, knowing how tricky Old Whip could be when he was riled. And then there was Black Joe Gaffer. He mentioned it to Chris. "Joe'll be anxious to pay you back that rifle slug you put in him."

"Tell you I didn't put a rifle slug in him," Chris grunted. "That's just some of Old Whip's lies—trying to build up an excuse for jumping me like he has." He spurred ahead and Pete said no more.

But his uneasiness increased as they neared the Crooked J. It wasn't like Old Whip to let himself be sent on a wild goose chase like this. Sooner or later, he'd stop and hunt for sign on the trail. When he didn't find it—

BUT on the other hand, he hadn't let Chris set too fast a pace on the way back, for he knew they'd need plenty of speed to get away with. Thus, it was breaking day when the buildings of the Crooked J loomed up in front of them. Pete took the lead, and stopped behind



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the corn crib. Chris slid out of the saddle.

"I'll go get him—I know how to wake him up without any fuss." He moved off in the gray half-light of dawn. Pete shifted his nervous, probing glance all around. He wanted a smoke, but decided it would be too risky. He peered after Chris—saw him slip through the back door of the house. He was thinking of a trail he and Frank had ridden many years ago.

It would take twice as long to reach Shoshone Valley by that route, but it would probably be the best one to take. It might throw Whip off long enough to give them a head start— He jerked nervously as Chris eased out the back door. Little Davey was with him.

The bunkhouse door banged open.

Chris swivelled at the sound. Black Joe Gaffer was in the doorway, with a rifle.

"So you came back, did you, you—" Black Joe yelled. Chris scooped up Little Davey and started to run, thus turning his back squarely to Black Joe.

An involuntary yell broke from Pete's lips as he saw Black Joe raise the rifle. The gun cracked, but Chris was ducking. The lead thudded into the corn crib a few feet from Pete.

"Cut out that shooting!" Pete yelled. "You'll hit the kid, you fool!"

Black Joe yelled something and raised the rifle again. It jerked a curse from Pete. His hand slapped his thigh and, inwardly, he groaned. In his haste, he'd left his gun in his room! Black Joe's Winchester slashed again.

Pete heard the bullet hit flesh and bone. Little Davey screamed, and Chris stumbled. A cold rage swept through Pete. He turned to the horses, and saw Chris's rifle in his saddle boot. He jerked it free; dropped to one knee and centered the sight on Black Joe's middle.

Click!

Pete stared dumbly at the rifle. He worked the lever once, threw it to his shoulder and pulled the trigger again. Another dull click. Savagely, he jerked the lever open, then flung it to the ground with a curse.

Black Joe's rifle spat again. Chris went down, just ten feet short of the corn crib. Pete darted out, dragged the two behind the corn crib. Davey was still screaming, and Pete started to look for a bullet hole.

"Just scared him when that slug tagged me," Chris gasped. Pete saw where the bullets had hit—in the shoulder and in the leg. He jerked Chris' sixgun, stepped around the corn crib and drove the foreman inside with three well-placed shots.

"We're in the clear now," he told Chris. "Gaffer couldn't catch and saddle a horse with that leg—here, I'll lift you on your horse—"

"Not so fast, son," Old Whip Jackson spoke quietly. In the excitement he'd walked within fifteen feet of the corncrib without being detected. "Figured it'd be easier to catch you by riding on past that clearing, giving you a chance to double back, then follow you. Ed, you and Frank bring Chris up to the house."

They were all in the kitchen—except Little Davey, who was in a room in another part of the house.

Pete was glaring at Black Joe Gaffer. "It sticks in my craw—that shooting," he growled. "You coulda hit Davey—and dam' near did."

"I figured it was right good shooting," Black Joe grunted. "I brought Hardy down, and never even touched the kid." He turned to Old Whip. "That's what you wanted, ain't it, boss?"

Old Whip grunted. He'd been watching Frank put a bandage on Chris' wounds.

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around the Crooked J again, I'd kill you. I'm a man of my word. Ain't no dam' sodbuster gonna work my little girl to death, then steal my horses and try to murder my foreman without me doing—"

BUT Pete didn't wait to hear any more. He slipped out the door and ran toward the corn crib. He was back a few minutes later, panting heavily from his run, and carrying Chris' rifle. He faced Black Joe Gaffer.

"I don't know what your game is, Joe, but what's the idea of claiming that Chris plugged you with his rifle?"

"Because he did, that's why!" the foreman snarled truculently.

"He snuck up on you and put that slug in your leg with his Winchester?" Pete persisted.

"Dam' right!" Gaffer said.

"You're a liar," Pete told him evenly.

Old Whip Jackson exploded. "I've heard enough of your lip for a while, Pete. Now cut out this dam' foolishness—"

"You ain't had as much as you're gonna have," Pete yelled back. "You're nothing but a mule-headed old fool!"

Old Whip was aghast. He sputtered and spewed, trying to find words. But before he could, Pete stepped close, held the rifle up, and jerked the lever back.

"Take a look at that firing pin. Busted! And the broken edge rusty—meaning that it's been broke a long time. I found that out when I tried to shoot Black Joe a while ago. Who did shoot Black Joe? And what for? If he was so anxious to pin it on Chris—it was because he didn't want you to know who actually shot him and *why?*"

"Keep your lip outta my business, you hellion!" Black Joe rasped.

"It might be Crooked J business," Pete retorted. "I know you had your mind set on marrying Molly and get-

ting your share of the Crooked J—and I been doing some thinking—Chris, here, don't savvy horses well enough to have gotten away with those thoroughbreds. But you—"

"That's enough." Black Joe was on his feet, both hands gun filled. "Shuck your guns, every one of you!" He let his eyes rove over the crowd, then come to rest on Pete. "Getting smart, ain't you? So I did take the horses—and I got this slug because I didn't think my split of the deal was square, but what the hell—now. Frank, you're coming with me—to saddle me a cayuse, then help me on it—"

But Whip Jackson was of a fighting breed. He dived for his gun. Black Joe whirled, his Colt flaming red. Old Whip jerked as the slug bit through his arm.

"Missed, huh?" Black Joe snarled. "But not this time—" He thumbed back for another shot.

A gun blared. Chris Hardy was coming to his feet, the gun in his hand streaking red. Black Joe took the first slug in his shoulder, half spinning him around. Chris fired again. Black Joe swayed a moment, incredulity, then fear, smearing a pattern across his features. The cocked gun in his hand never went off. . . .

The three Jackson boys and Little Davey Hardy were busy heating water. The little medico was laying out his instruments, preparatory to digging two slugs out of Chris Hardy, and one out of Old Whip. The two patients were taking it as easy as they could, swigging from a bottle the doctor had given him as an anaesthetic.

Old Whip passed the "medicine" over to Chris, then turned to Pete.

"Put an extra bed in my room—for Chris," he ordered. "Reckon the best chance I'll have to git acquainted with my son-in-law is while we're both laid up."

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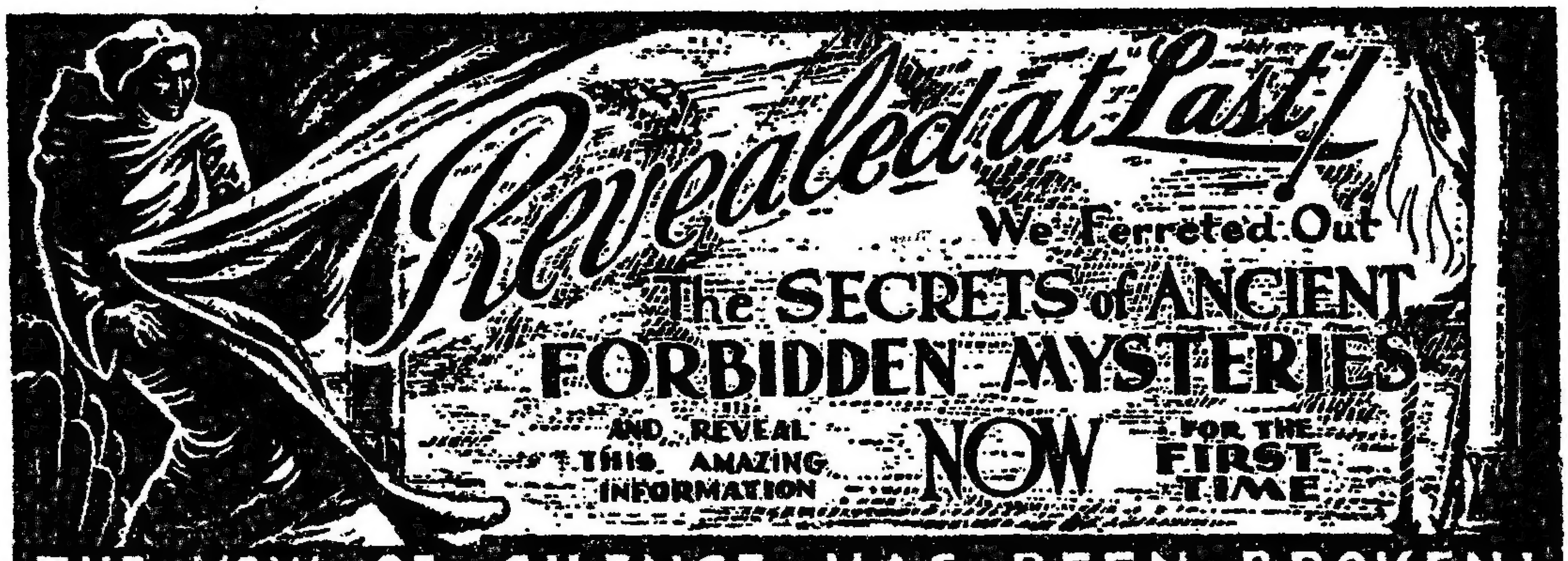

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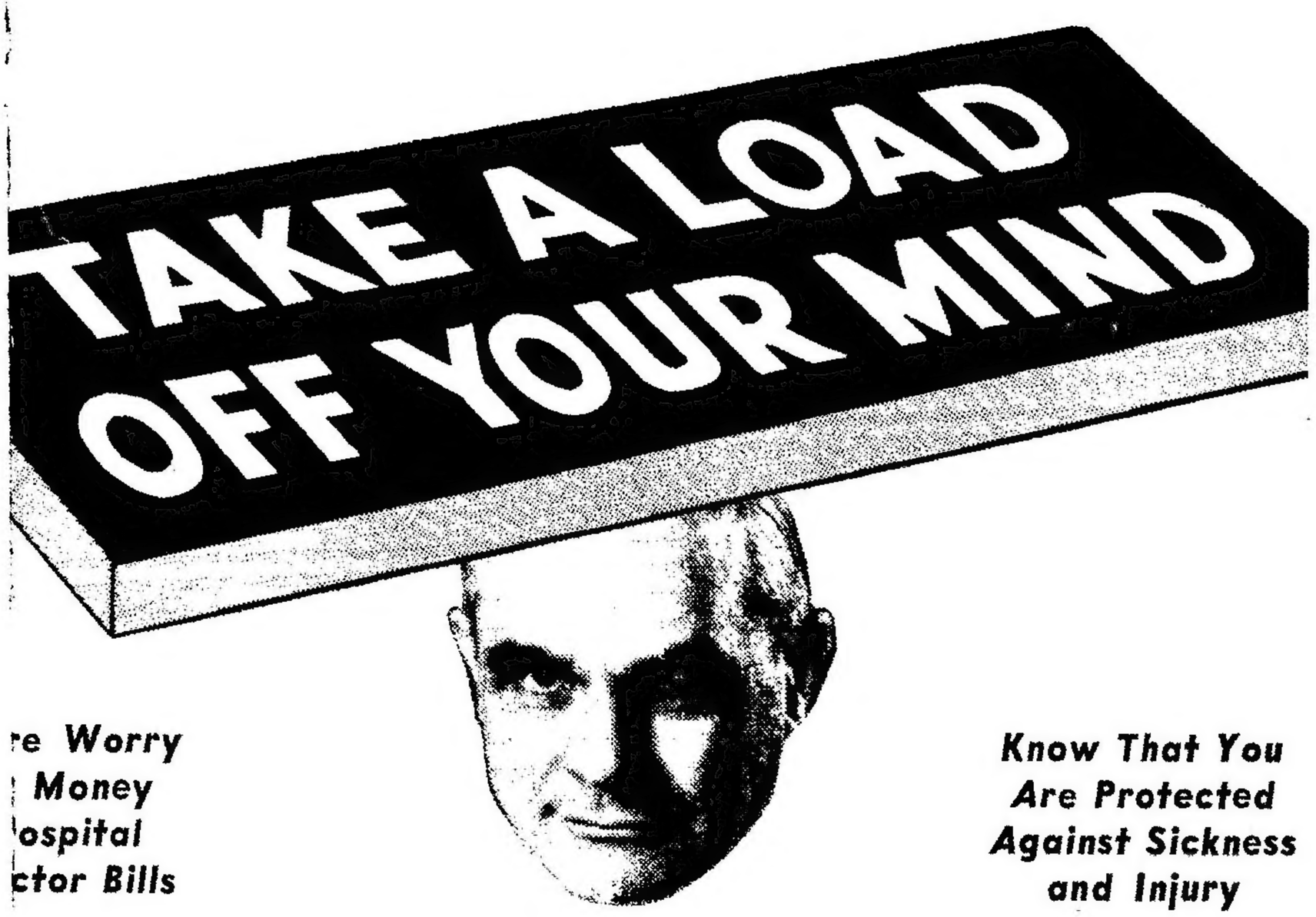

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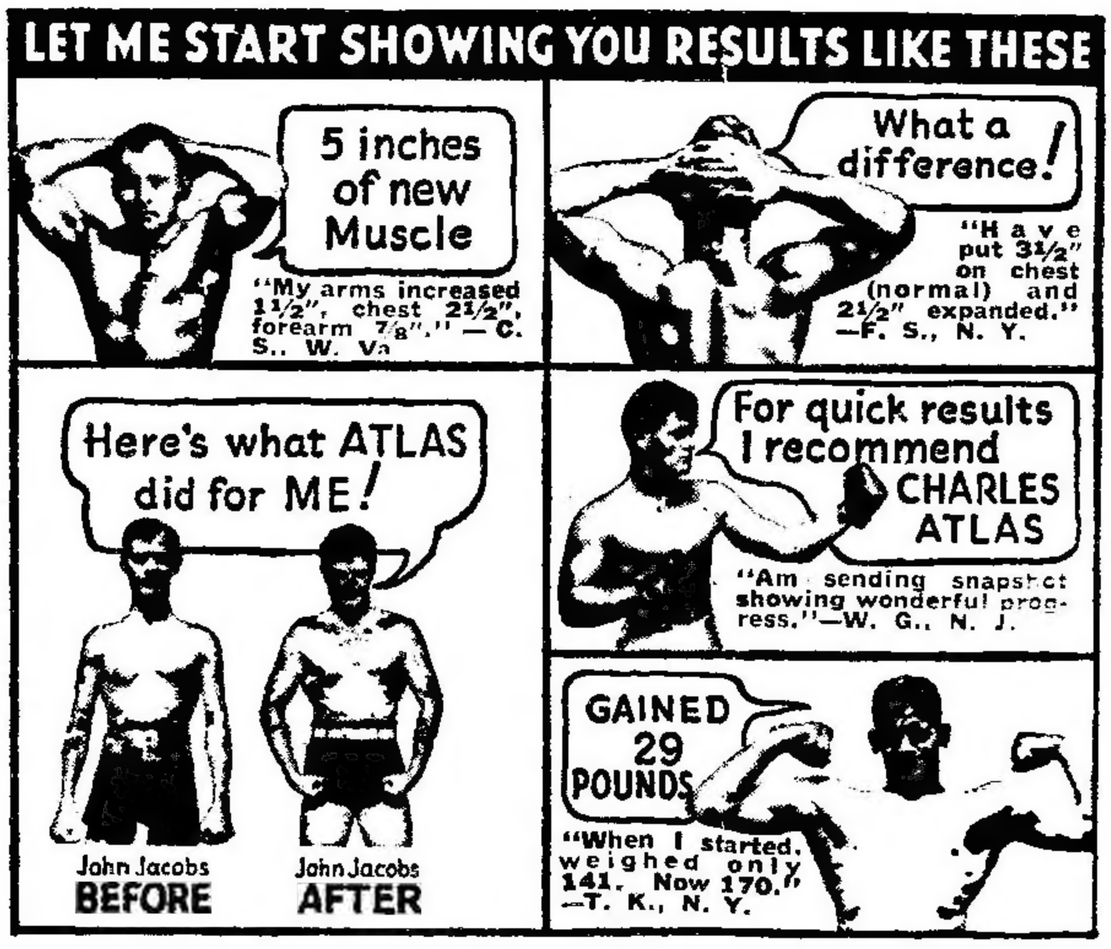
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I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE! I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours like and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your frame "measured" to a beautiful suit of muscle!

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"*Dynamic Tenston!*" That's the ticket! The identical natural method that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny-chested weakling I was at 17 to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens—my way. I give you no gadgets or contraptions to fool with. When you have learned to develop your strength through "*Dynamic Tenston*," you can laugh at artificial muscle-makers. You simply release the DORMANT muscle-power in your own God given body—watch it respond double-quick into solid LIVE MUSCLE.

My method—"*Dynamic Tenston*"—will turn the trick for you. No theory—every exercise is practical. And, man, so easy! Spend only 15 minutes a day in your own home. From the very start you'll be using my method of "*Dynamic Tenston*" almost unconsciously every minute of the day—walking, bending over, etc.—to BUILD MUSCLE and VITALITY.

FREE BOOK

"Everlasting Health and Strength"

In it I talk to you in straight-from-the-shoulder language. Packed with inspirational pictures of myself and pupils—fellows who became NEW MEN in strength, my way. Let me show you what I helped THEM do. See what I can do for YOU! For a real thrill, send for this book today. AT ONCE. CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 1452, 115 East 23rd St., New York, N. Y.

CHARLES ATLAS

Awarded the title "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man" in International Contest—in competition with ALL men who would consent to appear against him.

This present photo of Charles Atlas showing how he looks today. This is not a studio picture but an actual unretouched snapshot.

CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 1452,
115 E. 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.

I want the proof that your system of "*Dynamic Tenston*" will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

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City.....State.....

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